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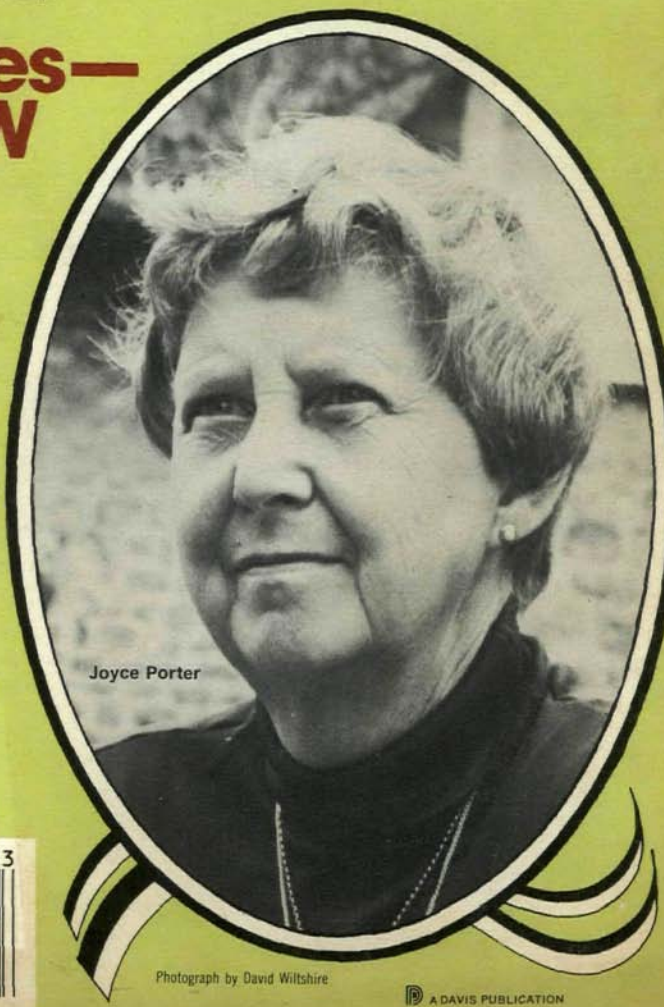

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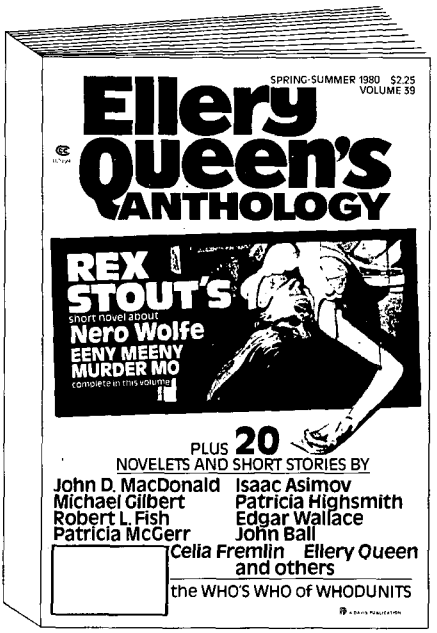

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PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER: *Joel Davis* EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: *Ellery Queen*

Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Vol. 76, No. 2, Whole No. 443, August 18, 1980. Published 13 times a year, every 28 days, by Davis Publications, Inc., at $1.35 a copy. Annual subscription $16.25 in U.S.A. and possessions; $18.50 elsewhere. Allow 6 to 8 weeks for change of address. Editorial and Executive Offices, 380 Lexington Ave., N.Y., N.Y. 10017. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 2600, Greenwich, Ct. 06836. Controlled circulation postage paid at Dallas, PA. *© 1980 by Davis Publications, Inc., all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright Convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE ® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Printed in U.S.A. Submission must be accompanied by stamped self-addressed envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts.*

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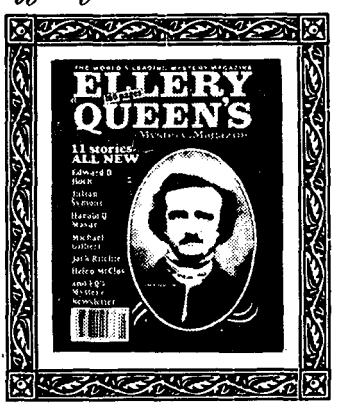

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a ***NEW*** **Simon Ark story by**

EDWARD D. HOCH

Simon Ark "claimed to have traveled the earth for close to 2000 years in search of Satan, and some nights when the moon was full and the drinks were strong," the chronicler of Simon Ark's mysteries "almost believed him." But a mermaid? In this day and age? A sorceress out of the sea who strangled a man alone on his boat with a two-foot-long tress of her own blonde hair? You must be kidding! But "there are more things in heaven and earth"—and in the sea—"Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" . . .

THE SORCERESS OF THE SEA

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"The sea is a woman," Simon Ark said, gazing out at the gently rolling waves as they drifted in to shore along the west coast of Florida. "At least that is what the poets tell us. A sorceress who lures the hapless mariner with waving locks of green."

"I know—like mermaids." I settled back in the car seat and watched a two-masted fishing schooner sailing far out on the Gulf. "Do you think it was a mermaid that killed Hans Belkor, Simon?"

"Stranger things have happened, my friend. I once knew a man who lived his entire life by the sea and then died by stepping on a fish. It was a stonefish, one of the deadliest of God's little creatures."

"But a mermaid—"

"I believe the term used in Belkor's log was *sorceress.*"

"All right then, sorceress. Do you honestly believe a sorceress or siren or mermaid strangled Hans Belkor with her own hair?"

"That is what we're here to determine."

I'd been vacationing at Palm Beach with my wife Shelly when I received the urgent summons from Simon Ark. He was in Sarasota,

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not much more than 150 miles away, and he needed my help. Shelly grumbled about it, as she so often did when I went off somewhere with Simon, but in the end she agreed that I could make the side trip to meet Simon while she went off on a two-day visit to an aging aunt in Key West.

I arrived in Sarasota on a Monday morning in early September, having promised Shelly that I'd be back in Palm Beach by Wednesday evening. I picked up Simon in my rented car and we drove north along the Florida coast, past the beaches and marinas that were so much a part of the region's economy. Presently we came to a high-rise condominium fronting on the water, and we sat in the parking lot while Simon finished filling me in on the details.

He'd been summoned to Florida by Regina Belkor, wife of the dead man—a woman Simon had encountered at various Manhattan meetings of assorted psychic research societies. "Her husband was strangled to death while alone on his ketch. He left a sort of log mentioning a sorceress who came from the sea to tempt him. And he was strangled with a twist of long blonde hair."

That was what he told me as we sat staring out at the sea—or at the Gulf of Mexico, to be more exact. Even without my flip comment about mermaids, it was obvious this was the sort of case that Simon Ark thrived on. He claimed to have traveled the earth for close to 2000 years in search of Satan, and some nights when the moon was full and the drinks were strong I almost believed him.

We took the elevator to the eleventh floor of the condominium and were admitted to a spacious apartment with a wide picture window overlooking the Gulf. Mrs. Belkor was the first surprise. I'd heard Simon mention her on occasion and had an image of a fat middle-aged woman whose whims ran to the otherworldly fascination of psychic research. The reality was quite different. She was no more than 35, with a trim figure and deep blue eyes that went well with her short blonde hair and deep suntan. She greeted Simon with a handshake and then turned to me.

"You're Simon's publisher friend. I've heard him mention you."

"Actually I'm an editor at Neptune Books," I said, correcting her. "I'm sorry to meet you under such tragic circumstances."

"Hans always did everything with style. His death was no exception." She suddenly remembered the fourth person in the room, which was the next surprise. "Gentlemen, this is Ronald Hanagan, an old family friend. He also happens to be investigating my husband's murder—for the local police."

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Hanagan, a tall gray-haired man who'd stood in the background till now, stepped forward to shake hands. "I'm here mainly as a family friend," he insisted. "I'm an investigator for the District Attorney's office, but we're not usually called in until the police make an arrest."

"Is an arrest imminent in this case?" Simon asked.

"Not that I know of."

"Has the funeral been held yet?" Simon asked Mrs. Belkor.

"Hans desired to be cremated. We're holding a memorial service on Friday."

"Suppose you tell me just what happened."

She started to speak, but her voice broke almost at once. Hanagan rested a gentle hand on her arm and took over. "We know very little, Mr. Ark, which is why Regina asked your help in the first place. Hans went out alone in his ketch late Saturday afternoon."

"Was that unusual?"

"No, sometimes he liked sailing alone after a day at the office. The ketch has an auxiliary engine and he didn't bother putting up the sails when he took it out alone. He was due back for a late dinner but he never returned. The Coast Guard spotted his running lights and just before midnight they found the ketch drifting three miles off shore. Hans was dead. He'd been strangled with a long tress of blonde hair that had been twisted into a garrote."

"Human hair?" Simon murmured. "An extraordinary murder weapon."

"Then he hadn't gone sailing alone after all," I said.

"The marina owner swears no one else was on the boat. He filled the gas tank and helped cast off the mooring lines, and Hans was alone. The killer must have intercepted him in another boat."

"Or come out of the sea," Regina Belkor said.

Simon Ark turned to her. "You used the word *sorceress* to me on the telephone, Mrs. Belkor. Just what did you mean?"

She reached over to pick up a large slim book from the end table. It appeared to be bound in sailcloth and had the single word *Log* printed on its cover. "I gave Hans this ship's log for Christmas last year, and he kept it on board the *Miranda*. I never had occasion to read it till after his death. This was the entry for last Wednesday—three days before he was killed: *Sighted strange glow in the sea just after sunset. As I approached I saw the water bubbling and steaming. From the very center of the glowing water a beautiful woman with long blonde hair came to the surface. I brought her*

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aboard. Her name is Doris, and I believe she is some kind of sorceress.

"Interesting," Simon admitted. "Is that all of it?"

"That's all for Wednesday. But he went out on Thursday and Friday too. I thought it was odd, because he didn't usually go sailing alone every night. On Thursday he wrote: *Doris again, rising from the glowing bubbles at sunset. I feel I am enchanted.*"

"Why was he alone on these nights? Why didn't you go with him?"

"He had a brokerage business. He usually drove to the marina directly from the office. I often went sailing on weekends, though on Saturday he said he wanted to go alone."

"I see. What else does the logbook say?"

"On Friday: *Doris visited me again. Where does she come from? Where does she go? Is this sorceress of the sea to be my damnation?*"

Simon took the logbook and glanced at the neat, precise handwriting while I looked over his shoulder. He turned back a few pages. The writing was exactly the same, but the comments were far less interesting: *Heavy seas,* or *Clear sailing, many gulls.*

"He must have expected you to see this log sooner or later," Simon commented. "Didn't he tell you anything about this woman from the sea?"

"He never mentioned a word about her. He came in late each night, after eleven, but when I asked him where he'd been he only said, 'Out on the boat.' From about six till nearly eleven each night."

"There's no entry for Saturday, the day he was killed."

"No," Hanagan said. "Obviously she killed him before he could write it."

"What do the police think about all this?"

"Not much," he admitted. "They don't like the idea of people rising from the glowing water of the Gulf of Mexico."

"We have only his word for it, of course," Regina said. "But his death—and the manner of his death—seems to give some weight to what he wrote."

"Where was the logbook found?"

"He kept it in a locked drawer on board the *Miranda.* I'd seen it only once or twice since I gave it to him, and I might never have seen it again if he hadn't died."

"Did he seem different in any way last week?"

"A bit edgy, perhaps. More excited than usual. But he said nothing." She poured herself a glass of wine without offering us any. "I assumed he was under some sort of pressure at work, and we never discussed that."

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It didn't sound to me as if they discussed much of anything, but I didn't put my thoughts into words. Simon turned to me at that moment and asked, "Do you have any ideas about all this?"

"Only that Doris is a fairly prosaic name for a sorceress."

"On the contrary, my friend, it is a perfect name. Doris was the mother of Amphitrite, who was the wife of Neptune. Doris was King Neptune's mother-in-law. What better name for a sorceress of the sea?"

Ronald Hanagan cleared his throat. "You can see why Regina was anxious to get your opinion, Mr. Ark. She tells me you're an expert on this sort of parapsychological happening. It's certainly more in your field than in mine."

Simon was running his fingers over the cover of the logbook. "Perhaps. In any event I will want to see the boat. And also the murder weapon. Today, if possible."

"That can be arranged," Hanagan said. "We'll stop by police headquarters and then I'll take you down to the marina."

"Fine."

Hanagan turned to the woman. "Want to come along, Regina?"

"No, I've seen enough of that ketch to last me a lifetime."

"Will you be all right alone?"

"Of course. I'm getting used to it now."

We left my rented car in the parking lot and drove to the police station in Hanagan's black sports car. It was an effort for Simon to bend his old bones into the small vehicle, but once we were on our way he seemed comfortable enough. "How well did you know Hans Belkor?" he asked Hanagan.

"Socially. Dinner parties and such. This is the sort of community where lawyers and brokers just naturally travel in the same circles."

"Did you know them in New York?"

"No, just since they moved to Florida last year."

Hanagan seemed to know everyone at police headquarters. A detective in charge of the case unlocked a filing cabinet and showed us a plastic bag containing a two-foot length of blonde hair, nearly an inch thick even though it had been twisted and tightened with use.

"It would take someone strong to strangle a man with that," Simon observed.

"Belkor had a little bump on his head," Hanagan told us. "If he'd been knocked out first it would have been easier. Our lab boys will check it today to see if the hair was freshly cut or not."

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The idea appalled me. "Do you actually think this so-called sorceress strangled Belkor with her own hair and then cut it off and left it knotted around his throat?"

"Stranger things have happened," Hanagan said. "Where do you think the hair came from?"

"Human hair can be purchased," I said. "Especially blonde hair, which is finer than black. It's sometimes used in delicate scientific instruments."

Simon held the hair close to his eyes, studying it as he might read the fine print in the newspaper. "Your lab should have checked this immediately," he told Hanagan.

The lawyer was obviously embarrassed. "We only have a small department here. No real lab," he admitted. "The Sarasota police are sending someone up to look at it this afternoon."

"While we're on the subject, will you be running lab tests of that handwriting in the logbook too, to make certain Belkor wrote it?"

"Oh, there's no doubt he wrote it. I'd know that neat little handwriting of his anywhere. Regina and I are certain he wrote it, but I'm having it checked against handwriting samples from his brokerage office, just to make sure I have an airtight case if we ever go to trial."

"Who do you think might be accused?"

"This sorceress person, of course. We'll see how her magic works on a jury."

Simon smiled. "You have to find her first."

Hanagan drove us to the marina next. He left the car in a parking lot and walked with us to one of the docks. "Here we are. That's Belkor's ketch straight ahead."

The boat Hanagan indicated was perhaps 30 feet long, with a tall forward mast and a shorter one near the stern. Between them was an enclosed cabin area with four little windows on each side. I followed Hanagan on board and then helped Simon negotiate the shaky gangplank.

"Have you ever gone sailing with Belkor?" Simon asked him.

"Not really. I've been to small parties on board, but we usually stayed close to shore."

"Where was the body lying when the Coast Guard found it?"

"As I understand it, Hans was sprawled by the cabin entrance here."

"And the log?"

"Was locked in this drawer. Regina found it when we were looking

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over the boat yesterday. That's when she decided to phone you."

Simon ran his fingers over the polished brass fittings. "Would it be possible to take the boat out, to the area where it was found?"

Hanagan smiled. "Just what do you expect to find, Mr. Ark? There are no footprints in the sea."

"There may be a sorceress, though. I'd like to find out."

"I have an appointment this afternoon, but maybe Sam from the marina could run you out. I'll ask him."

He left us and returned in a few minutes with a balding, weatherbeaten man named Sam Linter. "Always glad to help the law," he said, coming on board while Hanagan waved goodbye from the dock.

"This here's my marina now. Mr. Belkor helped me buy it earlier this year. He was a fine gentleman."

He produced a ring of keys from his pocket, chose one, and inserted it into the boat's ignition. The engine came to life and the *Miranda* edged away from the dock.

"Thank you for taking us out," Simon said.

"Wouldn't do it if Hanagan hadn't given his okay. The police were still here yesterday searching for clues. But he's with the D.A.'s office and if he says you're okay I guess you're okay."

"I gather you knew the dead man quite well."

Sam Linter scratched at a day-old stubble of gray beard. "Sure, everybody around the marina knew Mr. Belkor."

"How old was he?"

"Fifty-five, the paper said. I would have figured him younger than that. A vigorous man, in good physical shape."

They cleared the harbor and headed into the open waters of the Gulf. "Do you know Mrs. Belkor too?"

"Met her a few times, but mostly he liked to take the ketch out alone. Sometimes he was late getting back, after dark, and I'd watch for him at the dock, help him moor it."

"Did you meet him any nights last week?"

"Sure did. He was late every time. Almost eleven o'clock one night. I should have guessed something was wrong."

"Did he ever mention meeting someone out on the water?"

"Not a word. We chatted about the weather, and if the water was smooth—you know the sort of thing."

"What about when he sailed out in the afternoons? Did you see him then too?"

"Sure. I was usually checking his fuel tanks and stuff. And I'd

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help him cast off. When you're sailing alone it helps to have somebody handle the mooring lines."

"Did he ever show you his logbook?"

Linter looked blank. "Log? No, I never saw it. Not many owners of small pleasure boats keep a log."

"This was more a diary of his impressions on the trips," Simon explained. "There were no compass points or navigational details." Then Simon was staring out at the sky, where only a few fluffy white clouds dotted the horizon. "Was Regina Belkor his second wife, by any chance?"

"Don't know," Linter replied. "What makes you ask?"

"There's an age difference of twenty years, and the boat is named *Miranda.*"

"I asked him about that once. It's his daughter's name. She's away at college in England." He thought about that for a few seconds. "Say, I guess he musta had another wife if he's got a daughter old enough to be in college."

"Unless he married Regina while she was in her teens, which is possible." Simon seemed unwilling to leave the subject of Regina Belkor. "When I knew her in New York her hair was much longer. It hung halfway down her back. Did she cut it recently?"

"Not that I know of. The few times I seen her she looked pretty much the same."

"What about Ronald Hanagan? Did he come around often?"

"Occasionally, not often. Usually when Mr. Belkor had a few people on board for a party."

They headed north for another 20 minutes before Linter told us, "This is the area where the Coast Guard found the boat drifting. They told me it was just south of those keys at the entrance to Tampa Bay."

"Are there any other islands near here?"

"We have lots of keys all along the coast here, but most of them are within sight of land. There's nothing out very far."

"So if someone boarded the *Miranda* out here they had to come from another boat?"

"Sure."

"If he didn't use his sails you could tell how far he went by the amount of fuel he used, couldn't you?"

"Roughly. But most evenings he just went out and sailed in circles for a few hours. It relaxed him, you know—like some businessmen play tennis or golf after a day at the office."

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Simon stood staring at the sea a few moments longer, then sighed and decided, "Let's go back in."

We ate dinner at a little seafood place by the water, and over dessert I said to Simon, "You think Regina killed him, don't you? Strangled him with the hair she'd cut off her own head."

"No, no," he insisted with a smile. "It's much too soon to accuse anyone."

"Hanagan drives a sports car. He's got young ideas which might have included Belkor's wife."

"My friend, you are too quick to make a love triangle out of this. Are you unwilling to accept the possibility of a sorceress out of the sea?"

"Rising from a glowing bubble? Simon, that's exactly why these people got you down here in the first place—because they knew you'd take that logbook seriously! I think the whole thing is a fake."

"You are too much the realist, my friend."

"The sorceress of the sea has a nice ring to it, but as a book editor I can even tell you where they came up with that. In 1903 a British publisher brought out a collection of short mysteries about a woman murderer called *The Sorceress of the Strand* by L. T. Meade. I suppose if you wanted to invent a murderess at sea *The Sorceress of the Sea* would be a likely phrase."

Simon rarely chided my reasoning but he did so now. "I am familiar with the Meade book. But I am also familiar with a far older work—*The Sorceress of the Sea,* a poem signed only by *W.,* which appeared in a Boston magazine, 'The Memorial,' back in 1827."

"My God, Simon, how could you remember that?"

"The poem is quite long and deals with a woman who rises from the waves at midnight to tempt and finally kill a young mariner."

"Which proves what?"

"Which proves that this idea of a beautiful temptress rising from the water is not a new one. It is a legend perhaps traceable back to the Sirens who tempted Odysseus and his crew."

"You mean you actually believe it?"

Simon smiled and returned to his dessert. "As always, I believe until there is reason to disbelieve."

"In a sorceress named Doris?"

"Which reminds me—I would certainly think that as editor of Neptune Books you would be familiar with the names of the sea god's family. His wife was Amphitrite and her parents were Nereus and Doris. Amphitrite, in turn, was the mother of Triton—"

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I cut him off with a wave of my hand. "Too much, Simon." I was beginning to wish I'd gone with Shelly to visit her aunt.

"All right," he agreed. "It's time we got down to business. You watched Sam Linter handle that boat this afternoon. Do you think you could take it out tonight? With me along?"

"Who—me?" I was astounded by the question. "Back home I've got only a twelve-foot runabout, Simon."

"Could you take it out?" he repeated.

"Well, sure, I suppose I could. But I wouldn't guarantee getting either of us back alive."

"I'll attempt to guarantee that part."

"But the Coast Guard will arrest us for stealing the boat," I protested.

"Not if we have Regina Belkor's permission. Come on."

She opened the door of her condominium wearing a bright lounging robe that didn't exactly look as if she were in mourning for her late husband. "Oh—Simon Ark! I wasn't expecting you again this evening."

"We'll only be a minute," he assured her. "We'd like permission to take the ketch out tonight."

"But—but Ronald said you were out this afternoon."

"That was with Sam Linter. We wish to go out alone tonight. My friend here is an expert yachtsman, so there's no danger."

"Are you making progress?"

"Perhaps."

"Is there really something out there that killed Hans?"

"There was on Saturday night. I'm hoping it will be back tonight."

"All right," she decided. "Take the boat. But be careful."

"We'll need the key," Simon reminded her. "I know Linter has one, but it will be more legitimate if we have your key."

"Very well." She disappeared into the bedroom and returned with it.

"I'd also like the key to the drawer where the logbook was kept."

"The ignition key opens that too. My husband didn't believe in lots of different keys."

Simon paused at the door. "You never mentioned having a daughter named Miranda."

"What? Oh, the boat's name! She's Hans's daughter by his first marriage. She's studying at Cambridge, in England. That's why we delayed the service until Friday—so she can be here for it."

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"What happened to the former Mrs. Belkor?"

Regina Belkor seemed to grow pale at the question. "She was killed in a boating accident, while Hans was still living in New York. A sudden storm came up and she was swept overboard. He wasn't able to rescue her."

"I see."

If he saw, it was more than I did. When we were back in the car I asked him, "What was all that business about the daughter, and Belkor's first wife? Do you think she came back from a watery grave a thousand miles away to kill her former husband?"

"If the sorceress was the first Mrs. Belkor I'm sure he would have recognized her," Simon said.

"Then what—?"

"We are still gathering information. Tonight, with a bit of luck, we shall gather the most important piece of all."

"What do you expect to find out there, Simon?"

"What Hans Belkor found."

Sam Linter obviously thought it strange that we were taking the ketch out alone when a few hours earlier we'd needed him to run it. But he turned on the dock lights for us and cast off the mooring lines and we were on our way. It was the biggest craft I'd ever handled, but once we were free of the crowded marina area I felt more at ease with it.

"Just don't ask me to run up the sails," I told Simon.

"You're doing very well."

"Which way should I go?" It was almost sundown and I was anxious to complete most of our journey before dark.

"South, I think," he decided after some thought.

"But the boat was found drifting to the north."

"That's why we're heading south."

I shrugged and did as I was told. Simon busied himself by puttering around the cabin, looking in drawers and searching shelves. At one point he unlocked the drawer where the logbook had been, but now it was empty.

"What are you searching for?" I asked finally.

"I'll know when I find it."

He went over to a navigation chart that was unrolled on one of the bunks. I'd glanced at it as we made our way out of the harbor, to familiarize myself with the location of the fixed and flashing lights along the shoreline at night.

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"Here's something," he said suddenly.

I followed his pointing finger. "That's nothing but a pencil mark."

"He would have had to mark the location some way, if he returned to it three nights in a row."

"Maybe she found him, in a different location each time."

Simon ignored my suggestion and told me to steer for the spot indicated on the chart. Though there were shore lights to guide me, I was no navigator. A half hour later, when the sun had dipped below the western horizon, all I could say was, "This is the general area. It's as close as I can get."

In the twilight we could make out a long narrow key between us and the shore. "What's our depth here?" he asked.

I glanced at the chart. "We're right around the six-fathom line."

"All right. Don't go out any farther. We want fairly shallow water."

We headed south for another few moments. Simon had found a pair of binoculars and was studying the shore of the island as we passed.

He swung the binoculars and suddenly tapped my shoulder. "Cut your engine."

I did as I was told. "What do you see?"

"I'm not sure. Take a look."

"Is it—a glow of some sort in the water?" My heart was racing.

"That's what it seems to be."

"Do we go closer?"

"Of course. We're driffting in the right direction. Don't start the engine again unless you have to. And kill your running lights."

"That's against the law." But I did it anyway.

In the stillness of the night I thought I could hear distant voices. There was something else—perhaps another darkened boat—ahead of us. But as we drew nearer, the thing that held me fascinated was a glow of light from beneath the water. It flickered, grew, died, then came to life again. And all around it the water of the Gulf seemed to bubble and hiss. Then, when we were perhaps 50 feet away, someone broke the surface of the water—a woman, her sleek young body outlined by the glow from beneath the surface. I waited no longer. I pointed our spotlight at her and turned it on.

In that instant, as she rose in the water with her long blonde hair trailing behind her, I thought she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Here indeed was a sorceress who could lure Hans Belkor to his doom.

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Then she shouted, "Kill that damn light or we'll put a bullet through it!"

And the illusion was shattered.

The other boat came alongside and a young bearded man covered Simon and me with an automatic shotgun. The woman hoisted herself on board, water streaming from her long legs and one-piece bathing suit. She unhooked the scuba gear from her back and stared at us. "This is Hans's ketch," she said suddenly. "I thought I recognized it."

"Hans is dead," Simon told her. "As you may already know."

"Dead?" She pondered that. "I didn't know. We don't read the papers out here."

"Who are they?" the bearded man called out. "Should I get Larry out of the water?"

"Shut up a minute!" she called back. The other boat had drifted away from us, but the bearded man was still within shotgun range. I'd killed our spotlight as the woman had demanded, though there was still enough light for us to see each other. Some of it came from the flickering glow which was now directly next to our boat. The young woman turned her attention back to us and repeated his question. "Who are you? What are you doing with this boat?"

"We came to find you, Doris," Simon told her.

"How'd you know my name?"

"Hans told us," he replied, and I suppose that was true in a way. "He spoke very highly of you."

"How'd he die?" she asked.

"Quickly."

I couldn't take any more of their sparring. Pointing to the water I asked, "Will someone please tell me what's going on down there?"

Simon smiled and answered before Doris could. "They're after something on a sunken yacht, of course. Not too large a craft in this relatively shallow water. I'd guess some sort of narcotics. The lights we see are their underwater lamps and welding equipment."

"Welding equipment!"

"You know a great deal," Doris said. "Did Hans tell you all that before he died?"

"He told me nothing," Simon admitted. "But he left a logbook about his three meetings with you. I should have realized the first time I read it that its slightly poetic allusions were merely the ramblings of a middle-aged man in love with a lovely young woman."

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"What did he say?"

"He called you the sorceress of the sea, and I'll admit you do make a spectacular entrance, rising out of that glowing, bubbling water."

"What's causing all that?" I asked.

"It's from the welding," she replied indifferently. "You need compressed air for underwater welding, to keep the water away from the flame. It naturally churns up the surface a bit. Larry's an expert at it. He used to work for a Florida firm that specializes in underwater welding."

The man with the shotgun was growing impatient. "For Pete's sake, Doris, cut the chatter and find out what they want!"

"Jake's right," she said. "What do you want?"

"We're investigating the murder of Hans Belkor," Simon told her.

"You didn't say he was murdered!"

"I thought you knew. He was strangled with a two-foot length of blonde hair. The police have the logbook that mentions you, and they naturally suspect that you're involved."

"That's crazy! He came out here one night last week and found us at work. I had a few drinks with him on the boat while the boys kept working. He liked my company and came back twice more."

Simon nodded. "On Thursday and Friday. What about Saturday?"

"We didn't see him Saturday. Is that when he was killed?"

"Yes. The ketch was found drifting several miles north of here, but that doesn't prove anything. You've got something to keep secret here and Belkor found out about it. That could have been reason enough to kill him."

She stood with hands on hips, staring at Simon Ark. Suddenly she turned to the man in the other boat. "Jake, get Larry up here. We have to talk."

"But—"

"And put down that damn shotgun before someone gets hurt!"

He did as he was told and tugged at a group of hoses that ran beneath the surface from three large tanks on the deck of the boat. Almost at once the underwater activity ceased and the glow was extinguished. A young sandy-haired man in bathing trunks and scuba gear rose to the surface and climbed aboard the other craft.

"What's going on?" he asked. "Who's the old guy?"

"My name is Simon Ark. I am investigating the unfortunate death of Hans Belkor last Saturday night."

"Is that true?" the welder asked Doris.

"It's true. Somebody killed him. We could be in big trouble."

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"Hell, we didn't do it," the one called Larry said.

"You're already in big trouble," Simon advised them. "The Coast Guard will be searching these waters, and they're bound to uncover your little scheme soon. What is it? Something connected with drug smuggling, I'd guess. That's Florida's main growth industry these days."

"You know a lot for an old guy," Jake said. He glanced down at the shotgun.

"An unwise move," Simon cautioned before he could act. "Why make your troubles worse than they are."

"What do you want of us?" Doris asked.

"Proof that you didn't kill Belkor. You can start by explaining what you're building here."

"We're not building anything," she said with a sigh. "There's a sunken yacht down there. It's been there for ten years or more. It's on all the charts."

Simon smiled slightly. "I see. And with welded watertight compartments I imagine it would make a perfect way station for smuggled drugs. They could be unloaded here, possibly through a flexible hose, and stored in that sunken yacht for days or weeks. The smugglers' ship would avoid the danger of landing their cargo on the beach, and you could come out at your leisure and pick it up."

"He knows too much!" Larry grumbled. "Belkor must have told him."

"Belkor told me nothing."

"We didn't kill him," Doris insisted. "If we had, we'd certainly kill the two of you for what you've guessed. My God, the man was in love with me! He was older than my father and he was in love with me!"

"You saw him only on those three nights?"

She nodded. "Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday. He found us working out here, and he called me a sorceress. I told him I wasn't anything special, only a girl trying to make a buck, but he didn't care."

"He lost his first wife to the sea," Simon explained. "Somehow he must have thought the sea was giving her back, in you."

A light evening breeze had come up off the Gulf and the boats swayed gently as we stood there facing each other. Finally Doris asked, "What will you do now?"

"Go back to shore," he said. "What you do here doesn't concern us."

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The other boat pulled alongside and she jumped onto it. Then the two crafts drifted apart and I switched on the engine. The three of them stood watching us in the darkness as we pulled away.

Ronald Hanagan was standing on the dock as we eased the ketch into its berth at the marina. I was thankful for having got it back in one piece, and was unprepared for Hanagan's blustering. "Regina told me you took the boat out again. I think it was very unwise, especially after dark. This is a valuable ketch, and needs to be handled properly."

Simon Ark merely smiled. "My friend was quite skillful at the wheel. You needn't have worried. I trust you haven't been waiting here long."

"Long enough." He was still unhappy, but our safe return seemed to have calmed him a bit. "Look, we've got a lab report on that hair. It's not real."

"Oh?"

"It probably came out of a wig, they say. A fairly expensive one, because of the length of the hair. In the morning they're going to check some costume and theatrical supply shops in the larger cities."

"That's a good idea," Simon agreed. "You may need the evidence for the trial, after I tell you who the killer is."

"You *know?*"

"Yes, I know."

"You found something out in the Gulf?"

"You might say that."

"The sorceress of the sea?"

"No, only a breeze that rocked the boat gently on the water."

"A *breeze* told you who killed Hans?"

"Yes."

"I can't believe that!"

I also found it hard to believe, even though I was familiar with the intuitive nature of his deductions at times. I finished tying the ketch to its moorings and joined them on the dock. "It was a small clue," Simon began, "but an essential one. It had to do with the logbook in which Hans Belkor wrote about his encounter with the sorceress."

"It's his handwriting. We've verified that."

"I don't doubt it. Now it was the logbook, plus the use of the hair as a murder weapon, that led to a belief in this so-called sorceress. My friend and I found the sorceress tonight, and the fact that we

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are alive is the best evidence of her innocence."

"You found her?" Hanagan said, his mouth gaping open.

"That's another story for another time. We're concerned here with the strangling of Hans Belkor. There's no doubt that he wrote the logbook, and I can carry it one step further. If the so-called sorceress didn't kill him, the real murderer must have been familiar with his logbook entries. Otherwise why strangle him with that twist of hair, a difficult weapon at best? And why kill him on his boat, necessitating a second boat for the escape? The killing was made to seem the work of this sorceress, and thus the murderer must have known about the logbook. Who had this knowledge?"

Hanagan shrugged. "Regina gave it to him as a gift. But she never saw the entries till after his death."

"But *when* did Belkor make the entries in his logbook? Certainly within a day of his journeys, because when he died Saturday there was an entry for Friday. Did he make them on the boat or at home? Obviously on the boat. The log was kept there in a locked drawer. We can't believe he would remove it from the drawer, take it home to write in it—without his wife seeing it—and then return it to the boat. No, the entries must have been made on the boat."

"Well, of course," Hanagan blustered. "That's obvious."

"But *when,* on the boat? While it was out on the water?" Simon drew a deep breath and answered his own question. "Hardly, because you'll remember the handwriting was all neat and precise. But as the breeze reminded me tonight, the water on the Gulf is not uniformly smooth. In fact, one of the logbook entries actually describes *heavy seas.* It's impossible to believe Belkor could have written so neatly under those conditions. No, my friends, the only remaining possibility is that he wrote the entries each evening after the ketch returned to its moorings, but before he left the dock and returned home."

"How does that tell us who killed him?" Hanagan asked.

"There is one person who met the ketch most nights when it returned late, who helped moor it and filled its fuel tanks. A person who holds an ignition key that also opens the logbook drawer. A person who *must have seen* Hans Belkor writing in his logbook, yet denied it."

"Sam Linter," I said.

"Exactly. Why would he lie about the logbook? Only if he'd unlocked the drawer and stolen a look at it, and learned about the sorceress of the sea and how he could kill Hans Belkor. He cut some

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long blonde hair from a wig and followed Belkor out on the Gulf on Saturday evening. He hailed the ketch, came aboard, hit Belkor over the head, then strangled him."

"But why?" Hanagan wanted to know. "What was his motive?"

"He mentioned Belkor helping him buy this marina. They had a business deal together, and I think we'll find it was to Linter's financial advantage to kill his partner."

Suddenly there was the sound of a car gunning its engine. It shot out of the parking lot, heading toward where we stood on the dock. "It's Linter!" I shouted. "He overheard us!"

"Yes," Simon Ark said, as if he'd known it all along.

Hanagan and I dove for cover, but Simon stood his ground. It was as if he knew Sam Linter was beyond harming anyone but himself.

The car shot across the wooden dock and through a guard rail. Then it hit the water between two yachts, sinking almost out of view before we could do anything. Sam Linter made no effort to escape, and when Hanagan and I dove into the chilly water we found the car doors locked. By the time we broke through the window and dragged Linter to the surface he was dead. He'd chosen his own peculiar punishment.

I drove Simon to the airport the next day, on my way back to Palm Beach. "What about that girl, Doris?" I asked as he was boarding his plane.

"To Hans Belkor she was indeed a sorceress," he said. "Perhaps she loved him for a brief time, coming up from the sea like a goddess. But in a way she destroyed him. The words he wrote about her gave Sam Linter the idea how to kill him."

I watched until his plane was out of sight. Then, standing beside my car, I thought about Doris and that spot in the Gulf where the sea glowed and bubbled. I still had a day before Shelly expected me back. Perhaps . . .

But I shook my head sadly and drove on to Palm Beach.

"Q"

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a *NEW* Inspector Dover story by

JOYCE PORTER

The return to EQMM of Detective Chief Inspector Wilfred Dover of Scotland Yard, perhaps the most unlikable sleuth in the history of crime fiction . . . It doesn't take a sweltering summer day to bring out the worst in Dover—his grunting and growling, sneering and snarling, roaring and belching—but excessive heat helps. So pity the long-suffering Sergeant MacGregor . . .

SWEATING IT OUT WITH DOVER

by JOYCE PORTER

Every English summer, no matter how awful the weather is in general, is blessed with one gloriously hot, really sweltering day—and in drought years we sometimes have two. The savage murder of young Elvin Garlick took place on one of these exceptional days when the sky was blue and the sun blazed down. So, too, did Detective Chief Inspector Wilfred Dover's "investigation." Indeed, his conduct of the case and the highly unseasonable weather were not unconnected.

It was getting on for mid-day when Detective Chief Inspector Dover, chaperoned as always by MacGregor, his young and handsome sergeant, arrived at Skinners Farm. The temperature was already pushing up into the eighties and most people would have been delighted at getting out into the country on such a marvelous day. Chief Inspector Dover, however, wasn't most people and, in spite of appearances, Skinners Farm was only 25 miles from Charing Cross and so not really country anyhow.

Charitable people might have thought it was the heat which had

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addled Dover's brains but, in reality, he was just as slow-witted on even the most temperate day. On this occasion he didn't seem able to get it into his head that Skinners Farm wasn't actually a farm, but an over-restored Georgian house standing in its own grounds and separated from the hurly-burly of the outside world by a couple of fields full of gently ruminating black and white cows.

"I suppose they call it a farm, sir," said MacGregor, surreptitiously dabbing at the back of his neck with a lightly starched white handkerchief, "because it was once the farmhouse."

"Bloody fools," said Dover, the sweat standing out in beads on his forehead. As a concession to the weather, he had left off his overcoat—but the greasy bowler hat, the blue serge suit, and the down-at-heel boots were the same as ever. " 'Strewth," panted Dover, "but it's hot!"

"Perhaps we could have the window down a bit, sir," said MacGregor, who'd been wondering for some time if the peculiar smell in the police car was Dover or merely something agricultural they were spraying on the fields.

"I hope they've shifted that blooming body," said Dover querulously as he plucked at his shirt. "It'll be ponging to high heaven else."

MacGregor glanced at his watch. "They may not have moved it yet, sir," he warned. "It's only about an hour and a half since they found him, and since I understand he's lying in some sort of copse and reasonably sheltered from the sun—"

"You won't get me going to see it," declared Dover flatly. "I'll bet it's all crawling with flies. Here"—he roused himself as the car turned into a driveway—"are we there?"

The married couple who lived at Skinners Farm were, understandably, in a state of some distress and they greeted the arrival of the two high-powered detectives from Scotland Yard as though it was a heaven-sent solution to all the horrors of that terrible morning. Anxiously hospitable, they conducted a profusely sweating Dover through the house and out onto a comparatively cool and shady veranda.

Here they installed him on a cane chaise longue, plied him with cigarettes, and asked him what he would like in the way of a long cool drink. Dover, having graciously accepted pretty little Mrs. Hewson's suggestion of an iced lager, hoisted his boots up onto the footrest and flopped back. 'Strewth, this was the life! And it was going to take more than a bloody murder case to dislodge him from it.

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When, a few minutes later, Mr. Hewson came out with the drinks, Dover was more or less obliged to open his eyes. Having half a pint of ice-cold liquid sloshing around in his stomach had quite a bracing effect on him, however, and for a few minutes he was actually sitting up and taking some interest in his surroundings. The veranda, he discovered, overlooked a large and well-kept garden which fell gently away from the house. In the distance was what appeared to be a clump of trees where several figures in dark blue could dimly be seen moving about.

Dover had no wish to strain his eyesight by peering through the heat haze, so he treated himself to a good look at his host instead. Mr. Hewson, he ascertained without much interest, was a man of about 50, but very fit and youthful-looking. He was wearing a pair of powder-blue shorts and matching T-shirt, but his manner was far from being carefree and relaxed. As he explained with an uneasy laugh, he wasn't accustomed to stumbling over dead bodies in the middle of a Saturday morning.

Dover relieved his own inner tensions with a good belch and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "You found him, did you?"

"No, not exactly," said Mr. Hewson. "Tansy, here"—he indicated his wife who was happily engaged in refilling Dover's glass—"actually found him, but naturally I went down to have a look before I phoned the police. I hoped," concluded Mr. Hewson with a bleak little smile, "that she'd got it wrong."

"Still hanging around, are they?" asked Dover through a yawn which gave everybody a fine view of his dentures.

"The local police? Yes. The Inspector's using the phone in the sitting room and the rest of them are still down there in the old orchard." Mr. Hewson pointed toward the clump of trees which Dover had already more or less noticed. "They're searching through the undergrowth. Er—do you want me to tell them you're here?"

The last thing Dover wanted was a mob of local flatfoots swarming all over him in that heat. He leered encouragingly at pretty little Mrs. Hewson. "So what happened, missus?" he asked and rattled his now empty glass.

Pretty little Mrs. Hewson grew tearful. She'd told her story four times already and really didn't want to go through it all again.

Dover had little sympathy for a woman who seemed incapable of recognizing an empty glass when she saw one. "Oh, get on with it!" he advised impatiently.

Mrs. Hewson gulped, dried her eyes on a wisp of a handkerchief,

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clutched her husband's hand, and complied. "It's all my fault, actually. If I hadn't decided to grub up the old orchard and turn it into a vegetable garden, none of this would ever have happened. Freddie wasn't a bit keen on the idea—were you, darling? He said he'd do it himself sometime but—well, I know how busy he is, so I got hold of this young man from the village to come and do it."

"What young man?" demanded Dover, sportingly moving his empty glass even nearer so as to give Mrs. Hewson every chance.

"The young man who's been murdered. Elvin Garlick. He works for a firm of landscape gardeners so, of course, he's able to borrow their equipment."

"You mean he was doing the job for you in his own time?" MacGregor, sipping straight lemonade because he didn't drink when he was on duty, was taking notes. Well, somebody in that partnership had to behave responsibly, didn't they?

"Oh, yes!" said Mrs. Hewson with some pride. "And for cash. That way you get it cheaper because nobody has to pay income tax or V.A.T. or anything. The only trouble was," she added with a disconsolate little moue, "he could only come on weekends and that meant I couldn't keep it a secret from Freddie. I'd wanted to present him with a *fait accompli*, you see."

"Ugh," grunted Dover, just to show he was still awake.

"Well, Elvin arrived about half-past eight this morning." Mrs. Hewson raised her pretty little chin defensively. "He told me to call him Elvin. He said everybody always did, especially when he was obliging them. Well, I told him exactly what I wanted doing and left him to get on with it."

"And where were you all this time, sir?" MacGregor turned to Mr. Hewson.

"I was still getting up. Saturday's my day off, too, you know." Freddie Hewson felt that further explanation was required. "I'm a stockbroker so, of course, I'm in the City all week."

"So you didn't see Mr. Garlick?"

"No. I knew somebody'd come to the house, of course, and then later you could hear his rotovator or whatever churning away down there in the orchard. That's when this naughty little girl here"—Mr. Hewson squeezed his wife's hand affectionately—"finally had to tell me what she was up to."

"He was ever so surprised!" simpered little Mrs. Hewson happily.

"And then what, sir?"

"Well, then nothing, Sergeant. Tansy and I had breakfast out here

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on the veranda. Garlick was all right then because we could hear him—couldn't we, darling? After breakfast I went round to the back of the house to work on my car. I'm rebuilding a 1934 Alvis and there were a few things I wanted to get done before it got too hot."

"And you, Mrs. Hewson?"

"I was in the kitchen, getting as much as I could ready for dinner tonight. Well, you don't want to spend a glorious day like this slaving over a hot stove, do you?"

"The kitchen's on the far side of the house, too, Sergeant," explained Mr. Hewson, "so neither of us could see anything going on in the old orchard. And, as I told the other policemen, we didn't hear anything, either. We were both pretty absorbed in what we were doing and, of course, Garlick was a good way off and he wasn't using his machinery the whole time. Well, at about eleven, I suppose it would be, Tansy brought me out a cup of coffee to the garage. She said she was going to take some down to Garlick, too. I would have gone myself, of course, but I'd just started stripping down the clutch and it was all a bit fraught and I really didn't want to leave it."

"Oh, I didn't mind, lovie!" cooed Mrs. Hewson. "Like I said, I was glad to get out of that kitchen for a few minutes and stretch my legs."

MacGregor nodded. "So you walked down to the old orchard with the coffee, Mrs. Hewson?"

"That's right. Well, when I got there, I couldn't see or hear Elvin anywhere, so I shouted his name. I wasn't keen to go tramping about down there because it's waist-high in weeds and nettles and things." Mrs. Hewson stretched out her shapely bare legs for the general delectation and to emphasize the point she was making.

MacGregor did, indeed, begin to sweat a bit more freely, but it was many moons since any part of the female anatomy had sent the blood racing through Dover's veins. He merely pushed his bowler hat a bit farther back on his head and inquired if anybody'd got a cigarette to spare.

The murder investigation ground to a halt as the Hewsons obligingly rushed off in all directions to fetch cigarettes, matches, and ashtrays. They finally redeemed themselves by refilling Dover's glass, and it was only when they'd got Dover happily swilling and sucking away that Mrs. Hewson was able to finish her story.

The end proved something of an anticlimax. Having received no answer to her shouts, Mrs. Hewson had gingerly ventured farther into the old orchard and found Garlick just lying there, face down;

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with his own pitchfork sticking out of his back. Pretty little Mrs. Hewson wasn't sure whether she'd screamed, but she was certain she hadn't touched the body.

"I didn't have to," she explained unhappily. "I just knew he was dead. I dropped everything and came running back up here to tell Freddie."

Mr. Hewson took up the tale. "I went tearing down to the old orchard," he said, "and there he was. I couldn't see any sign of breathing—Garlick was stripped to the waist, by the way—and with that pitchfork pinning him to the ground . . . well, I knew it couldn't be an accident or anything. I left everything just as it was and came back up here and phoned the police."

"And we had a patrol car here in less than five minutes." A man who had been waiting just inside the sitting room for a suitably dramatic moment stepped forward. There was an unmistakable drop of the jaw when he got his first clear look at Dover, but he recovered well and introduced himself. "Detective Inspector Threlfall, sir. I arrived at eleven twenty-six in response to an urgent summons from the patrol car and I have been in charge of the preliminary investigation since my arrival."

Detective Inspector Threlfall paused in case the seventeen and a quarter stone of solid flesh stretched out on the chaise longue wished to make some response. It didn't. With the mercury climbing that high in the thermometers, Dover had no energy to spare for social niceties.

Inspector Threlfall cleared his throat and tried again. "You'll want to see the body, sir."

That stung Dover into life. "I bloody shan't!" he growled, the mere thought of venturing out into that hot bright world outside making him feel quite sick.

"The doctor thought that Garlick had been knocked unconscious with a blow across the back of the head, sir." Inspector Threlfall would never have believed that Dover didn't care a fig either way. "Then he was run through with the pitchfork while he was still out. Crude, but effective."

MacGregor took pity on the Inspector. "Are there any signs as to which way the murderer came, sir?"

Inspector Threlfall shook his head. "Not so far, Sergeant. Mind you, Buff had been churning things up for a couple of hours before he bought it, so it's a tricky job trying to sort things out. Mind you, the murderer could have come from almost any direction. Crept

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down this way past the house or come across those fields or"—Inspector Threlfall waved his arms about in the appropriate directions—"got into the orchard from the other side. You can't see it from here, but there's a road running along there, not fifty yards from where Buff was killed."

Dover's chair creaked pathetically as he tried to find a more comfortable position.

"Buff?" queried MacGregor with a frown.

Inspector Threlfall shrugged. "That was his nickname. I've known him since he was old enough to appear before a juvenile court, you know, and he's been a regular customer ever since. We're going to miss him. He's had a go at pretty well everything—pinching old ladies' pension books, drunk and disorderly, breaking and entering, nicking cars, shoplifting—"

"Good heavens!" gasped Mrs. Hewson faintly.

Inspector Threlfall glanced at her with just a touch of contempt. "That's how he got his job with Wythenshaw's, madam. His probation officer swung it for him. Well, they'd tried everything else. Seems they thought a spell of honest toil might sort him out. I don't know what old Wythenshaw's going to say when he finds out Buff's been 'borrowing' all that expensive gear."

"But he told me his boss was only too willing to lend him the stuff," protested Mrs. Hewson, carefully avoiding her husband's eye.

"Well, he would, wouldn't he, madam?" asked Inspector Threlfall easily. "Always had a very smooth tongue, young Buff, especially where the ladies were concerned." He turned back to MacGregor. "That's where I'd start looking, if I was you, Sergeant. Buff's got more girls into trouble than you and I've had hot dinners. There must be hundreds of fathers and husbands and boy friends thirsting for his blood—and that's not counting any members of the fair sex who might have had it in for him."

"It hardly sounds like a woman's crime," said MacGregor doubtfully. He was dying to get down to the old orchard and see things for himself.

"I don't see why not. You don't need much strength to knock somebody out with a chunk of wood or something, and that pitchfork had prongs as sharp as a razor. It would go through him like a hot knife through butter."

"Oh, dear!" moaned Mrs. Hewson, clamping both hands across her mouth and going as white as a sheet.

Her husband leaped across, and wrapping his arms protectively

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round her, helped her to her feet. He smiled apologetically at the three stolidly staring policemen. "She's a bit upset, I'm afraid. I'll get her to have a little lie-down. You don't want us any more just now, do you? I think we've told you all we know."

Nobody seemed much concerned one way or the other, though Dover did bestir himself to remark that, if Mr. Hewson was thinking of making his wife some tea, he—Dover—wouldn't say no to a cup.

"These cold drinks are all right," said Dover confidingly to an astonished Inspector Threlfall, "but there's nothing to touch a good hot cup of tea, especially in this bloody weather. It brings you out in a good muck sweat."

"Oh—quite," said Inspector Threlfall. "Er—I was wondering what your plans were, sir."

"Plans?" Dover squinted suspiciously.

"I thought you might like to pop down to the village, sir, and have a word with the lad's mother. He lived with her and she might just know something. I've got some chaps out making general inquiries around the neighborhood, but I thought I'd best leave Mrs. Garlick for you."

There was an awkward pause. Not that Dover was hesitating. Wild horses weren't going to shift him off that veranda until the temperature outside dropped by at least 20 degrees, but there was the problem of conveying this message to Inspector What's-his-name without too much loss of face. "How many people knew he was going to be working here this morning?" asked Dover in an attempt to give himself time to think.

Inspector Threlfall rubbed his chin. "Not many, I should think. Not if he was borrowing the gear without permission. Besides, it's not the sort of thing you'd expect young Buff to be doing in his spare time. Normally, if he wanted extra money, he'd just nick it."

MacGregor wiped the perspiration off his upper lip. The veranda was only comparatively cool. "Maybe he's turned over a new leaf?"

"More likely casing the joint," said Inspector Threlfall. "The Hewsons must have been mad to let him come within a mile of this place."

MacGregor fanned himself gently with his notebook. "It was more Mrs. Hewson, wasn't it? I don't think her husband knew anything about it until Garlick turned up this morning."

"Seems he wanted that old orchard left just as it was," said Inspector Threlfall. "Claims it's a nature reserve or something. I reckon he'll pin her ears back for her when all this is over."

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Most untypically at this stage in the proceedings, Dover was wide-awake and listening intently. It wasn't, however, the lethargic conversation about the Hewsons' private life that was claiming his anxious attention, but the more interesting rumbles that were coming from his stomach.

MacGregor laughed a cool, sophisticated, man-of-the-world laugh. "Hewson'll just have to teach her who's boss, otherwise he won't be able to call his soul his own."

"Hark who's talking!" jeered Dover, for whom it was never too hot and sticky to be unpleasant. He left his guts to take care of themselves for a moment. "You could write all you know about married life on a threepenny bit, laddie, and still have room for the Lord's Prayer. Any moron can see that she's got him by the short and curly. What do you expect when a man goes and marries a flighty young thing half his age?"

"I don't think he's quite as—"

"Near as damn-it!" snarled Dover, who didn't care to be contradicted, especially when he wasn't feeling too frisky in the first place. "There's no fool like an old fool."

"Speaking of marriage," said Inspector Threlfall—but nobody was listening to him.

Dover had tuned in to those ominous visceral splutterings again and MacGregor was frantically trying to work out if Dover had spotted something he'd missed.

"Do you think it might be a case of jealousy, sir?" MacGregor asked, eyeing Dover doubtfully.

Dover blinked. "Eh?"

MacGregor grew even more worried. "The elderly husband, sir, and the attractive young wife? Plus the sexy young man from the village? Do you think there could have been anything between Mrs. Hewson and Garlick?" MacGregor appealed to Inspector Threlfall. "You did say Garlick was attractive to women, didn't you, sir?"

"Like a honeypot to flies," agreed Inspector Threlfall.

"Or, maybe"—MacGregor was more interested in his own brilliant deductions—"it was *Mrs.* Hewson! She takes the coffee down to the old orchard, say, and Garlick makes improper advances towards her. She repulses him. He persists. She picks up the nearest fallen branch or what-have-you and—"

"Bunkum!" said Dover, coming out in a hot flush at the mere thought of such an expenditure of energy in that heat. "She'd not have the strength. She's only knee-high to a grasshopper."

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"Garlick wasn't all that big a chap, sir," said Inspector Threlfall as he remembered that these two Scotland Yard experts hadn't yet even seen the body. "A woman might have done it. But what I wanted to mention, sir, was about the Hewsons."

"Well, why don't you spit it out, then? I haven't got all bloody day to sit around waiting for you to come to the point."

The training that Inspector Threlfall had received at the police school all those years ago stood him in good stead now. Otherwise Skinners Farm might have witnessed another and even bloodier murder. "They're not actually husband and wife, sir. Not legally, that is."

Dover shrugged his ample shoulders and folded his hands over his ample paunch. "So what? It's no skin off my nose." He closed his eyes against the glare coming in from the garden, only to snap them open again as the desire to score off a brother police officer proved stronger than the longing for a quiet forty winks. "She wears a wedding ring," he pointed out, much to MacGregor's amazement because one didn't really expect Dover to notice such things. "And she calls herself 'Mrs.' "

"That's as maybe, sir," said Inspector Threlfall, nobly swallowing the rejoinder he would have liked to have made. "But they are definitely not married—well, not to each other. Hewson's already got a wife. Or as far as anybody knows, he has."

"And what the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"It's just that I happened to be involved when she did a bunk, sir. The first Mrs. Hewson, that is. I was on duty when Hewson came in to report that she was missing. It must be six years ago, now. He wanted us to find her."

"But you didn't?"

"There's nothing we can do about a runaway wife, sir. You know that. I carried out a routine investigation but there was nothing suspicious about her disappearance. All I could do was suggest to Mr. Hewson that he try the Salvation Army, not that it was her sort of thing, really."

Working on the principle that "talk, talk on the veranda" was a damned sight better than "walk, walk across that dirty great garden," Dover demanded more details about the first Mrs. Hewson and her mysterious disappearance. Inspector Threlfall was obliged to search his memory. As far as he was concerned, the whole incident had been totally unremarkable. It was true that the first Mrs. Hewson had cleared out without a word and nobody had heard from her

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since, but this could be attributed to pure spite.

"Spite?" queried Dover, almost as though he was interested.

"It makes it difficult for Hewson to divorce her, sir. As things stand now, he's got to wait all of seven years and then apply to the courts for permission to presume that she's dead. Meantime, his hands are tied. You can't serve divorce papers on a woman you can't find. Hewson, himself, reckoned that she'd stay out of sight until the seven years was nearly up and then put in an appearance again, just to be bloody-minded. The marriage was pretty well on the rocks when she left home but she seems to have made up her mind not to let him go without a struggle."

"You're sure there were no signs of foul play?"

"Quite sure, sir. She'd taken all her clothes and jewelry and her passport. There were a couple of suitcases missing and she'd cleared out their joint banking account. Her car turned up a few weeks later. It had been abandoned in the long-stay car park at Gatwick Airport but there were no clues in it as to where she'd gone."

Dover ran a stubby finger round inside his shirt collar. 'Strewth, it was hot! He hoped What's-his-name wasn't going to be all bloody day with that cup of tea. "Was there another man?"

"Hewson thought there might be, sir, but he didn't know. She was on her own here quite a bit while he was off working in the City."

"What about her friends?" Dover might not have been the world's most brilliant detective but, in his long years in the police, even he'd managed to pick up a few bits of technique. "Did she mention to any of them she was thinking of running away?"

Inspector Threlfall shook his head. "As far as I can remember, sir, she didn't have any friends. At least, not round here."

"Relations?" Dover had begun thrashing about in his chair like a stranded porpoise.

Inspector Threlfall watched these antics nervously. Was Fatty having some kind of heat stroke or was he merely trying to hoist himself to his feet. "Only a sister in Ireland, sir, and they hadn't spoken for years."

With a final wheeze Dover managed to stand up. Too hot to move, it may have been, but, when Nature calls, even the least fastidious of us is obliged to go. Especially if we have bladders as weak as Dover's. "Bloody foreign muck!" he grumbled. "It goes straight through you. I don't know why people can't give you proper English beer." He turned to MacGregor who was trying to pretend that none of this had anything to do with him. "Where is it, laddie?"

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Long association with Dover had taught MacGregor to give a high priority on every possible occasion to locating where "it" was. "I believe there's a small cloakroom at the foot of the stairs, sir."

Dover departed at an urgent trot, leaving a thoughtful silence behind him on the veranda.

Inspector Threlfall loosened his tie. "He's a bit of a lad, eh?" he said at last.

MacGregor responded with a thin humorless smile and changed the subject. "Have you any ideas about who killed Garlick, sir?"

"Some," said Inspector Threlfall, seeing no particular reason to be helpful. Left alone he reckoned he could have solved this case in a couple of hours flat.

"One of his fellow yobboes, sir?"

"Could be."

"Friday is usually payday," observed MacGregor carefully. "Garlick was a bit of a drinker, I think you said?"

"He liked his pint."

MacGregor closed his notebook to show that this was an off-the-record conversation. "You often get drunken rows blowing up on a Friday night. Maybe this one didn't get settled until Saturday morning. I mean, who else—except his mates—would have known he'd be working out here this morning? Apart from Mrs. Hewson, that is. He'd have hardly spread the news around, would he? And it would only be a local chap who'd know there was easy access to that old orchard from the road."

Inspector Threlfall contented himself with raising his eyebrows in an enigmatic sort of way. If that was how the clever dicks from the Yard saw it, good luck to 'em! Inspector Threlfall wasn't going to stick his neck out just to show them where they'd gone wrong.

It seemed a very long time before Dover came waddling back. MacGregor tried to get him to continue on down to the scene of the crime while he was still on his feet, but Dover brushed his sergeant's efforts to one side and flopped back into his chair.

"I've just been out round the back," he announced.

MacGregor's heart sank. Oh, it was all so mortifying! "But, sir," he wailed, "I told you exactly where the cloakroom was!"

Dover flapped an impatient hand. "Not that, you fool!" he growled. "I went there first. It was after when I went round the back of the house to have a look. Bloody good thing I did, too. Do you know what? You can't see the kitchen from the garage and you can't see the garage from the kitchen."

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"Sir?"

"That means he did it, laddie!" explained Dover helpfully. He nodded cheerfully at Inspector Threlfall. "All we need now is a bulldozer and a warrant."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

Dover's good humor began to evaporate. If there was one thing that really got to him, it was stupidity, especially on a blooming hot day like this. "You got cloth ears or something?" he asked Inspector Threlfall savagely. "I've solved your murder for you. 'Strewth, some people want it with bloody jam on!"

Inspector Threlfall very sensibly clung on to the one bit of this he could understand. "You've solved the case, sir?"

"It came to me out there," said Dover, not without a touch of pride. "I wasn't just twiddling my thumbs, you know. Then I went round the back and Bob's your uncle. It all fits. All you've got to do is dig up the evidence and charge him with murder."

"But charge—er—who, sir?"

"Well, What's-his-name, you bloody fool!" roared Dover. "Who else, for God's sake? Look, this morning he waits until his wife—or whatever she is—is safely shut up in the kitchen. Right? Then he nips out of the garage, round the *other* side of the house—get it?—and down across the bloody garden."

The gesticulations which accompanied this vivid account were a little uncertain as Dover had not actually seen the terrain he was describing. "He sneaks into this orchard place, finds young Who's-your-father, picks up the nearest blunt instrument, and knocks him out. Okay? After that, all he has to do is finish the job off with the pitchfork. Easy as shelling peas."

Rightly deducing that nothing useful was going to emerge from Inspector Threlfall's feebly gaping mouth, MacGregor himself tried to introduce a note of sanity into the proceedings.

"Are you saying that Mr. Hewson murdered Garlick, sir? But why should he? He didn't even know Garlick. In fact"—MacGregor riffled officiously through his notebook—"he claims that he'd never even seen Garlick until after he was dead. That's a very definite statement, sir, and easy enough to check."

Dover scowled. Trust MacGregor to start nit-picking! "He didn't have to know Garlick," he said sullenly. "He'd have croaked anybody."

"You mean Mr. Hewson is some sort of homicidal maniac, sir?"

Dover's scowl blackened. If it hadn't been for the excessively hot

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weather and MacGregor being such a big strapping chap, Dover might have been sorely tempted to go across and belt him one. Insolent young pup! "Hewson," he snarled through gritted dentures, "would have killed *anybody* who started digging that old orchard up."

The penny dropped and MacGregor could have kicked himself. "You mean—"

"I mean that's where he buried his first blooming wife!" snapped Dover, making sure that MacGregor didn't steal his thunder this time. "She didn't run away. He killed her and then buried her with all her clothes and jewelry and stuff out there in that orchard."

Inspector Threlfall recovered his powers of speech. "But I investigated the first Mrs. Hewson's disappearance, sir, and there were no suspicious circumstances."

" 'Strewth," sneered Dover happily, "you wouldn't know a suspicious circumstance if it jumped up and bit you! Hewson was just too clever for you, that's all."

"Well, it's true the marriage wasn't a very happy one," said Inspector Threlfall, meekly accepting the slur on his professional competence, "but we took that as a motive for her leaving him." He glanced across at MacGregor for support. "I suppose we could have Hewson in again and ask him a few questions."

Dover reacted to this suggestion with unusual passion. "Not yet, you bloody don't!" he spluttered indignantly. "I'm still waiting for that cup of tea he promised me!" This must have sounded a bit thin even to Dover's ears. "Besides," he added in an attempt to place his policy of inaction beyond all question, "I've been invited to lunch.

"Look, why don't you two just push off and get that orchard dug up? It'll probably take you two or three hours. Soon as you find the wife's dead body, you can come and tell me. But not before two o'clock at the earliest, mind! Then we can confront What's-his-name with the facts and get a confession out of him. There's nothing to worry about. He's not the stuff heroes are made of. He'll soon cooperate if we shove him around a bit. And now"—the Dover eyelids drooped slowly over the Dover eyes—"why don't you just bug off and leave me to have a quiet think?"

"Q"

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When the opportunity came for Vince Virdon, a teacher of Slavic Languages at a Midwestern university, to be a translator for the World Trade Federation in Warsaw, Poland, he jumped at the chance and secured a two-year leave of absence. His wife Maggie went with him . . .

THE SEDUCTION SCENE

by PETER MEINKE

It's not everyone who has been shocked by licking the inside of an unplugged telephone. That's how to tell if you're really being bugged: unplug the phone, unscrew the mouthpiece, take out the amplifier, and lick the copper flange. If there's still electricity there—it doesn't hurt much, though Vince Virdon jumped back so fast he knocked the potted cactus off the window sill—if there's any current at all, watch what you say on the phone: you have company.

Virdon was not surprised. His boss, Bill Matthews, was not a total idiot, and he had told Vince that all the Americans working in Warsaw would be bugged or followed or both, at least for a while. But Vince's wife, Maggie, was indignant.

"How can they do that?" she cried, perhaps equally upset at Vince for ruining her cactus. She was sweeping up the dirt and putting the mashed plant in a plastic canister. "We're not spies, for God's sake. We don't even know what we're doing here!"

Virdon was patient, as usual. "*They* don't know that," he said. "They can't tell who's a spy and who's not, the same as us. You can bet your bottom bunny we bug *them* in Washington." He was going through their apartment systematically, inch by inch. By the end of the afternoon he had found two more listening devices, one behind the heavy bureau in their living room and one below the kitchen sink; he was pretty sure that was all there were, and he didn't touch them.

"I think that's it," he said. "Nothing in the bedroom."

"I'll say," said Maggie. "They're not so dumb. Listen you," she yelled at the kitchen sink, "this apartment stinks! There's no hot

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water, we've got roaches in the kitchen, bedbugs in the bedroom, and the furniture looks like the Salvation Army. If this is Communism I feel sorry for you!"

"Dear," Vince said, "that doesn't do any good. Besides, they'll think the Salvation Army is some sort of military strike force."

Maggie picked up the telephone. She was enjoying this. "Hello," she said. *"Dzién dobry."* She slammed down the receiver, and her cigarette butts jumped out of the ashtray.

"A pigsty!" she yelled. "Everything's so flimsy!" She lit another cigarette, and suddenly had an attack of stage fright. They decided to go out to a café where they could talk more freely.

It is true that certain people are meant for each other, but due to circumstances and personality this is not necessarily a long-term proposition. Maggie and Vince Virdon were a childless couple in their mid-thirties, who in the course of thirteen years of marriage had grown almost allergic to each other. They had met at a Little Theater production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*—she had played a murderess and Vince had been one of the victims—and though they started out with certain similarities, the theater was their sole remaining common interest.

When the Surgeon General's report on smoking was published, Vince gave up cigarettes; he had now reached the point of extreme sensitivity—any smoke in the room would make him cough and make his eyes water. Maggie, on the other hand, had increased her smoking in direct ratio to the tension in their marriage. Right now she was practically a chain-smoker. On the long flight to Poland they had sat apart, he in the non-smoking and she in the smoking sector. This was not far enough apart, as LOT, the Polish airline, simply sat smokers on the right, non-smokers on the left, which led to various jokes and a serious fit of wheezing on Vince's part.

"You'd better quit," he'd tell her. "You heard what Dr. Basick said."

"Dr. Basick," Maggie said, "is an alcoholic. Anyway, I'm twice as healthy as you! What do doctors know? Every time doctors go on strike, the death rate drops."

It was true that she seemed the healthier. On a sort of reverse twist to the smoking problem, Vince had gradually developed hypochondriacal tendencies; he suffered from headaches, backaches, stomachaches; he thought a shooting chest pain was a heart attack and would hurry to Dr. Basick, who would tell him to relax. But his biggest fear was cancer. Out of his modest salary as a teacher of

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Slavic languages at a Midwestern university he began squirreling away money for what he thought of as his cancer fund: every blemish on his skin threw him into a panic and he was terrified at the thought of being unable to afford treatment.

This ran directly into the teeth of Maggie's tendency, as she crossed over into her thirties, to indulge herself in the material things she had done without during his graduate school and early teaching days. She bought a closetful of dresses and shoes, a pearl necklace, an expensive stereo set, and put in wall-to-wall carpeting in their undistinguished but large faculty house. She had never had a headache in her life—like ghosts, she didn't really believe in them—and refused to take aspirin even for her hangovers, which were rare. She looked on his large assortment of pills and vitamins and ointments with a blend of loathing and despair.

Someone has wisely divided the world into two primary groups, the sick and the healthy. In our complicated and self-conscious society we should perhaps add the subgroups—those who *think* they are sick and those who *think* they are well.

Health and wealth. Those were the subjects they argued about, coloring everything they did. The fact that they were still together testified to their skill as actors; while their other friends divorced, remarried, and divorced again, Maggie and Vince were trapped by their own talent for dissembling. A handsome couple, they were looked upon by their friends and relatives as an example of that growing rarity, the perfect marriage. His parents loved her; her parents loved him—both sets of parents thought their own child extremely lucky and somewhat undeserving.

They had become, to the small circle in which they moved, a symbol of stability, and like all good troupers they felt a sense of *noblesse oblige:* the show must go on. They appeared together in many college and small-theater productions, and everyone always envied their grace and ease with each other, and it was true: they were a good team except when no one was watching.

Though he was not well read, Vince looked the part of a university intellectual of the new breed. He was slightly above medium height, slim and broad-shouldered, his hair a little long but with a neatly trimmed dark beard. He had deep brown eyes and a soft hypnotic voice. Maggie was a petite and effervescent redhead, with a good figure that could be provocative when she wanted it to be. She had a trained contralto voice, and their parties often concluded with Vince playing the guitar and Maggie singing songs like *Cockles and*

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Mussels and *Scarborough Fair,* or tunes from *South Pacific* and *Oklahoma,* in which they had starred together. It was an act tough to break up.

He was an excellent mimic, besides, and good at languages, and he had chosen Slavic studies because his college advisor had told him that would be the most practical thing to do. He was not particularly interested either in language or teaching but, like many of us, he did it because he could do it. So when the opportunity, through a friend who had entered the Foreign Service, came up for him to be a translator for the World Trade Federation in Warsaw, he had jumped at the chance and secured a two-year leave of absence from the University. Maggie was excited, too; she felt they needed some drastic change in their life or else they would kill each other, and, after all, Warsaw was famous for its theater and opera. Feeling daring and self-important, they packed their bags and took their show on the road.

It was not successful at first. Their Warsaw apartment was on the fifth floor of a building on Aleje Sobieskiego, with no elevator, and surrounded by other equally gray and graceless structures. When Maggie looked at the flaking green paint, the walls crayoned by children, the two six-by-ten sleeping cells, the tiny greasy kitchen with its half-refrigerator, and the living room with its tacky furniture, she said, imitating Elizabeth Taylor in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* —What a dump! with the accent on the "p." Their friend, Mort Levinson, was apologetic.

"I know it's crummy," he said, "but there's absolutely no housing available in Warsaw right now. We had to pay twenty thousand zlotys a month for this one, believe it or not. That's almost seven hundred bucks! Unless we changed money on the black market, which we can't do. Of course, they're ripping us off because we're Americans. We're looking for another one, and as soon as a decent one comes up, it's yours."

The apartment seemed hopeless. It immediately became permeated by the stale smell of Maggie's cigarettes. They took separate bedrooms because she smoked in bed, but the apartment was too small for them to escape from each other. Vince coughed continually. When they opened the windows to air it out, flies and the soot from a nearby factory blew in.

There was a small balcony off her bedroom, but it was covered an inch deep with the excrement of the omnipresent pigeons, who Vince was certain were the carriers of foul diseases. He made an effort to

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clean the balcony, holding his breath and slopping water across it, but within a few minutes there was an angry banging on their door. The thick liquid was dripping down on the balconies below them, where the other tenants hung their laundry. He gave it up, and they never opened that door again.

It was the bugging that saved them. Although Vince was disappointed in the lack of sophistication of the devices—it made him feel unimportant—their new acquaintances assured them that they were indeed being listened to. It was a major source of humor for the American community attached to the U.S. Embassy. "He's so refreshing!" they would say of a guest at a party. "He talks just as if we weren't being bugged!"

So, in a way, Vince and Maggie felt they were always on stage, and they acted in their apartment as they acted in front of their parents. He was solicitous about the problems she had with shopping and cooking; she was concerned with his job. Was he working too hard? Was there too much pressure in this world outside of the university campus?

In truth, their life was much easier. Most of the day he translated written reports, and this was a snap, so he was often "walking the halls," the Embassy euphemism for someone with nothing to do. Twice a week he attended Polish-American meetings, and though oral translating was more difficult, his natural dignity and patience stood him in good stead. In a short while, too, they learned how to change their money on the black market, and this had the amazing effect of quadrupling their income, since the official rate of exchange was 30 to 1 and the black market rate varied from 120 to 150 to 1.

The Poles were crazy about "hard currency"—dollars, deutsche marks, francs—because, among other things, you needed them to buy cars or to travel abroad. The result of this bonanza was to give Maggie, for the first time, enough money to fulfill her whims. She bought sheepskin coats, leather suitcases, feather blankets, paintings, amber jewelry, and hand-carved Polish plates. Vince disapproved of her excesses, but in the apartment he always looked at her purchases and admired her taste, which was not all that good: she tended to buy plates or paintings that said WARSAW or POLAND on them.

They did almost all their arguing in cafés, where they felt most private in the midst of other couples huddling over the small tables. In these summer months they liked to sit outside in Rynek Stare Miasto, the Old Town Square, drink beer, and insult each other.

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But even here, the picturesque re-built buildings, with horse-drawn carriages clopping by over the cobblestones, had the feeling of a stage set: it looked like a Seventeenth Century town but was actually less than 30 years old, so they chose their words carefully.

"You know," Maggie said one day, "I've decided what you look like. You look like one of those mad German scientists in World War Two movies. Sort of stuffy and empty at the same time."

"Thank you," he said. "And you could have been one of those chorus-line hoofers in a third-rate German cabaret, except you're too short."

"That's right," she said. "We could have met there. You would have brought me flowers, second-hand, and we would have had an affair and then committed suicide at the end of the war. That would have been nicer than this."

"Than what?"

"This. This nothing. Living in a tenement, worrying about money, and listening to your stomach growl."

"Listen," said Vince. "It's not a tenement, just a dumpy apartment, and I don't see you worrying much about money these days. Or about my stomach, either. We're going to need a special airplane just to take all your loot home."

"Good," she said. "As soon as you get it, put me on it, too."

Some days he would return to the apartment and Maggie would be drunk. As her shopping sprees slowed down, she took to sitting alone in cafés during the afternoons, holding imaginary conversations with friends and lovers, in the course of which she would get quite tipsy. She was an actress and her own best audience, and would steal glances at her reflection in the café windows. Not that she wanted to be pretty: she wanted to be *interesting*. This was difficult as, despite a certain gift for invective, she had no real sense of humor—at least, Vince had always told her that.

Sometimes, of course, her conversations were *not* imaginary—after all, she was a pretty woman sitting by herself in a café, trying to look interesting. Though she occasionally accepted a drink from someone who spoke English, she basically preferred to talk to herself; and if they didn't speak English, she would shake her head and not let them sit down.

"Bug off," she would say with a warm smile. "Go play with the traffic." If they smiled back warmly she either kept shaking her head or got up and left. At heart, she was not a libidinous woman.

Actually, Vince played this game in reverse. In the crowded bus

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on Marszalkowska, he looked at a young lady earnestly and said, "You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"I am sorry," she said in Polish. "I don't know where it is."

They never told each other of these linguistic adventures, but both got that extra charge from the possibility—the probability—of eventually hitting one who spoke English.

Maggie was a good drinker but after a few whiskies or vodkas her smoking habits became sloppy—that was the giveaway. Vince would look with disgust at the lipsticked crumpled butts in saucers, cups, glasses, spoons, flower pots—once she ground one out on his only pair of reading glasses. He could have strangled her on the spot. But with great effort he would keep quiet, dutifully shaking some more cocktails and discussing dinner, which they almost always ate out before going to the theater, or opera, or movie. At the black-market rate this was cheaper for them than staying at home and drinking.

One Saturday afternoon they were sitting at the Ali Baba, talking above and below the ragged gypsy music favored by the cheaper cafés. They had finished several drinks.

"You're boring," she said. "Boring, boring, boring."

"What?" he asked, leaning forward.

"You're too boring to repeat things to," she said.

"Look, I'm bored, too, but I have a good idea."

"You're going to have a sex-change operation? It's about time."

"No, be serious" (I *am* serious, she said). "Let's put on a play. In our apartment, for the benefit of our listening audience. Let's put on a lot of plays, like guerilla theater—we'll ad-lib and really have fun and confuse them."

"You mean the nasty buggers? That's crazy. They're probably not even listening, anyway. They've been bored to death!" But Vince could tell she was intrigued and just objecting out of habit.

"Let's start this afternoon," he said. "Let's shock their little tails off and do a real seduction number."

"That would be a change, anyway," she said. "I thought you were going to play tennis with Levinson."

"Not till four or four thirty. We've got plenty of time for a little skit. Who knows? It might really get sexy. I can always skip tennis."

"You might get a heart attack if it did." But her shoulder gave a little wriggle; it was clear the idea appealed to her. It had been a while since they had actively used their play-acting talents.

On the way back to their apartment they sketched out, with much giggling, a rough outline. He would play some vaguely foreign char-

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acter named Karl whom she had brought home from a café. There would be a huffing and puffing seduction scene—how far it would go they would play by ear—in the midst of which Vince would wrench open the door and enter in his own person. There would be a confrontation, with much shouting and weeping, and "Karl" would be thrown out violently—"I'll break a chair!" said Maggie. "I hate those chairs!"—and then they would make love right by the bug in their living room, with much groaning and shouting, to drive the buggers crazy.

"Terrific!" Maggie cried. "You're not going to chicken out on me?"

"Of course not. This'll be fun—we can run a regular soap opera five times a week. *Maggie Virdon, Maggie Virdon.*"

"Or *The Way Warsaw Wobbles!*"

"Or *The Way Poland Pulsates!*"

When they reached their apartment they fell silent, as they always did before going on stage. They met no one going up the stairs, and pausing in front of their door, Maggie gave Vince their old thumbs-up sign, which they had often used in better days. She unlocked the door and they stepped in.

"Well, this is it," trilled Maggie. *"Chez moi!"*

"Enchanting," said Vince in a deep harsh voice with a slightly Germanic accent. "Chust like you, my dear."

"Take off your jacket," she said, "and I'll make us a good strong drink."

"I've had a drink," he said gutturally when she returned, and took Maggie in his arms, kissing her hard on her lips. Her gasp was only part acting.

"Karl," she said, "Oh, Karl. I haven't been kissed like that in a long time."

"Ah, that is your husband's fault"—Vince winked at her—"he doesn't know how to handle you, that's all." They had walked over to the large sofa in the living room. Maggie pulled the pillows off and sat down.

"That's right," said Maggie, lying back on the sofa, "he's a real creep. And you're so *strong,*" she crooned, rolling her eyes.

"Yes, little Maggie. There. Just lie back and close your eyes. That's right. Good."

When Maggie closed her eyes, Vince picked up the heavy pillow and fell on her with all his force. He pinned her down, holding his head out of reach of her clawing hands. It was a silent, furious, and unequal battle; his strong arms and legs held her firmly beneath

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him while her small fingers raked ineffectually at the jacket he had not taken off.

He pressed the pillow powerfully over her face in a rush of strength and terror—this was no longer make-believe—and he held it there a lot longer than he had to. When he finally lifted it and slid exhausted to the floor, Maggie had been dead for several minutes.

After he recovered his breath, he took their glasses back to the kitchen and wiped them clean. He hung his jacket in the closet and opened drawers in both the bedrooms, scattering clothes and taking a handful of Maggie's jewelry. He wiped the drawers clean, and stuffed the jewelry into a brown-paper bag, put it in his tennis carrying-case, and quietly left the apartment.

The tennis courts were on the other side of the Vistula. He stopped at The Three Doves for a quick beer, then walked over the bridge, casually dumping the bag into the middle of the river. He didn't think anyone saw him, and anyway it looked like his leftover lunch or some other garbage.

He arrived at the courts a half hour early, got dressed, and had a drink. He was geared up for a performance and his hands didn't shake. When Levinson arrived, Vince was relaxed and cheerful; in fact, for the first time he won in tennis—he seemed to see the ball more sharply, as if it were coming at him in slow motion. Levinson was impressed.

"You were really good today! Let me buy you a drink."

"I'll settle for a ride home. We can have a drink with Maggie."

Mort Levinson was the perfect one to go home with. He was sympathetic and reliable; he was neither critical nor particularly observant. Vince knew he could count on Levinson's reactions, and he was right. After the first few frantic minutes of discovery, the cries of anguish, the attempts at mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, Vince simply crouched in a corner while Levinson called the police, the hospital, and the Embassy.

Vince didn't cry, but stared at the floor, and every few minutes his entire body would shake convulsively. This was easy to do, as the sight of Maggie's pale and disheveled face, her eyes wide-open in horror, almost unnerved him. It was such an extreme look of horror that the thought crossed Vince's mind that she was acting and about to sit up and point an accusatory nicotine-stained finger at him.

Several hours went by in a blur, with Mort taking care of everything. Maggie's body was removed; Vince didn't even look up when

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they took it away. He was waiting nervously for the right question. He had already been asked, very delicately, where he had been that afternoon. He had been, he said, at the café of The Three Doves before walking over to play tennis.

He had actually stopped there twice, once before meeting Maggie and once on his way to tennis, each time making sure the bartender spoke to him in English. It was always a crowded place, inside and outside, and there was a good chance people thought he was there all afternoon. He was also certain the Ali Baba wouldn't remember him: it was so loud and busy, he had spoken Polish, and they had never been there before.

The general concensus was that Maggie had been surprised by a robber in the apartment; perhaps she had left the door unlocked.

Finally a man who had arrived late, in plain clothes, came over to him. He was a fat man with a red nose and small shrewd eyes, and he had the question Vince had been waiting for.

"Do you know anyone by the name of Karl?"

Vince's head jerked up. "Karl?" he paused. "She *did* mention the name a few times, someone she met at a café. But I don't know him. I don't even know what country he's from. Why? What has he got to do with this?"

The man didn't answer him but turned away and talked to the uniformed police. After a while he came back and asked, "Do you always go drinking before you play tennis?"

"I only had a few beers."

Levinson had been standing nearby, with the lawyer from the Embassy. "Yes, he always does, and he still plays terrifically. He beat me easily today."

The man seemed to digest this information slowly. Then he shook Vince's hand. "I'm sorry to have bothered you. We'll be working on this and will be in touch as soon as we find out anything."

Later that night, after everyone had gone, patting him sorrowfully on the back, after Levinson had gone last of all, promising to return the next day, Vince cleaned and washed all the ashtrays, opened the windows, made himself a vodka martini, and turned on the television. He had always known he was a better actor than she was. He had a sense of humor, too, he thought, and so, keyed up as he always was after a good performance, that night he watched the late show—a re-run, with subtitles, of *Arsenic and Old Lace*.

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a *NEW* short story by

ROBERT TWOHY

If there is another short story in the mystery genre even remotely like this one by Robert Twohy, we haven't read it or heard of it. It's "a story for today and for evermore" (though we hope not the latter), and it's devastating.

Here are your Editor's reactions while reading the manuscript for the first time: in the beginning—fantastic (in the sense of wonderful); in the middle—what in the world is Twohy trying to tell us? And in the end—sensational, colossal, stupendous (in the Hollywood sense), a story of stardust and crumbled dreams . . .

HOORAY FOR HOLLYWOOD

by ROBERT TWOHY

Wanting a change, I flew up to San Francisco on Friday night, and on Monday morning when I got on the plane for the return flight I had wobbly disco knees and gongs in my head, which was the whole idea of the weekend.

I cabbed from Burbank to my apartment on Orange Drive, one of Hollywood's classier streets—my lifestyle was good and on the way to getting a lot better. *Catastrophe* was expected to be the big movie of the year, with the great Bora Pelicularu directing—it was his production, the trades said he'd sunk five million of his own in it. And I had the lead role. My first really big one, after 14 years in the vineyards. *Catastrophe* would do for me what the *Falcon* did for Bogart.

As I dropped my bag on the floor, kicked off my Guccis, and fell on the couch, I had yeasty thoughts of the future that lay ahead.

The phone rang.

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Half in a doze I reached for it and fell off the couch. Fortunately the rug was thick. I got the phone and, rubbing my ribs, said, "Hello."

A voice with a foreign lilt said, "So finally you are home. This is Bora. I tell Finnegan but for polite, want to give you personal the news . . . *Catastrophe* is *kaputsky*. I return to Rashpudlovik."

I took about eight breaths, finally managed, "Return to where?"

"To family estate, back in homeland. In English mean fertility, fruitfulness, things in blossom. Very poetical name."

"Yeah, really nice . . . *Catastrophe* is *kaputsky*?"

"Not right for today—and I am director for today. Understand?"

"No." All I understood was that suddenly I wasn't going to be the new Bogart. "*Catastrophe* is great! It'd rank right up there with the top detective movies—the ones that are real art. Like the *Falcon, Chinatown*—"

"Fooey on *Falcoon, Chinatown*—only one film from yesterday great for today. You know which one?"

"Which?"

"Big Schlepp."

After a few seconds I figured that one out. "*Big Sleep*. Yeah, that's another great one."

"You know why great? I tell you why. 'Cause it don't make no sense."

"Huh?"

"No sense. I see it twenty-six time and still not know who do what or why. They just do it. Everything confoözel—and that why it still great movie for today. 'Cause it got right mood for today. And that why *Falcoon*—"

"Falcon."

"Yah, Big Bird—why great film for yesterday but not today. Too much sense—just like *Catastrophe*. Not mood for today. So go back to homeland and get new creative visions. Come up with whole new contraption—"

"Conception."

"Whatever. Work up great new approach so *Catastrophe* be film for today. Call you when get back. Goo'bye."

That seemed to be that. "Thanks for your call. Have fun in Pashrudlovik."

"Rashpudlovik. Pashrudlovik means pregnant buzzard."

"Whatever."

We hung up. I needed sleep but thought I needed a drink more. I got a bottle of blackberry brandy, took it to the couch, lay down,

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and drank from the neck. When it was empty I went to sleep.

The movie life is total unreality but you put eight weeks into a great script, do better than you've ever done in your life, and whamo it's *kaputsky* and you're left with nothing but a big urge to drink enough to take away the taste of crumbled dreams.

But first, before I started on what I intended to rank with the classic drunks of Hollywood legend, I called my agent, Finnegan, at his home. It was about seven P.M.

I went on a while about what a soulless rat Pelicularu was and he made consoling noises, then said, "Geniuses go by their own inner voices. Forget him. Something new has come up."

His voice took on a furtive tone. I got a picture of him crouched behind his phone, shooting furtive glances in various directions. He's basically a very furtive guy. He's repulsive, but not a bad agent as the type goes. "Something very hot. Meet me at Flupo's at eight."

"By eight I'll be a slobbering drunk. Lay it on me now."

"Can't. I had to promise to play clam. Flupo's, eight sharp."

I tried to slam the phone down quicker than he did so he'd get the whack in the ear, but as always he was quicker and I got the whack. You can't beat Finnegan for fast moves with the phone.

I got to Flupo's, took a dinky little table in the bar, looked around, saw no one I recognized, just a few celebrities that weren't very celebrated and the usual mawk of tourists. Suddenly I saw a smile and damned if it didn't belong to a woman with soft reddish hair with lights in it, and green eyes with the same.

She was standing a little away from my table. She wore a glittery maroon dress that above the waist was quality rather than quantity, and her skin was California gold. Around her neck shone a lot of pearls. On her arm she carried a stole that if it wasn't pure mink I'm Laurence of Olivier. This lady was loaded, and in every way spectacularly. She said in a low voice, "May I sit down?"

I half got up, knees rubbery—and not just from the Frisco discos. I looked at my watch. It said 8:10. Finnegan was late. I hoped he'd stay that way.

She sat down. "I was passing, and recognized you. You're Randy Spear."

I'm not, really—I'm Elbert P. Hummell, originally from Sapulpa, Oklahoma. But Finnegan thought Randy Spear had a lot more pizazz, so that's who I've been since coming to Hollywood.

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We looked at each other, this woman and I. Finally she murmured, "I didn't stop for an autograph. I recognized you and thought how nice it would be if you bought me a margarita."

I signaled the cocktail girl and gave her an order for a margarita and a refill of my highball. The red-gold goddess smiled at me. "The evening is young, the night is dark and beautiful, the drive to Ojai is a delight that never dulls. Don't you love that drive?"

"With a passion." I'd never driven it but had no doubt it could lead to wondrous places. "Do you live in Ojai?"

"Do I live anywhere?" It was said very low. The brightness of her eyes was dimmed by a sudden shadow.

It wasn't part of the game we'd started, the Hollywood game, which I know real good and which she seemed to know too. That shadow over her eyes wasn't Hollywood—it was reality.

Just for a second. Then it was gone and her eyes had the sparkle again. Whatever had brought on the shadow, she wanted to forget it.

Our drinks came. I took a swallow and said, "You know who I am, which puts you a square ahead."

"Barbara Bacon." She sipped her margarita, gave me back my gaze. "I was wondering—but I'm presumptuous. You were waiting for someone."

"Was I?" I'd forgotten Finnegan. He was always super-punctual—something must have come up. Perhaps an accident. "Maybe I was waiting for you."

She said, in that low voice, "Maybe you were. Maybe some things are destined."

And again her sparkle was darkened—just for a second.

Fifteen minutes later we crossed the parking lot to a blue Cad, an open convertible. I thought first it was a beautiful old model, because they haven't made convertibles for years, then saw it was this year's model. For $50,000 or in that neighborhood you can get a standard turned into a convertible, at some specialty shop up near San Jose.

She said, "D'you want to drive?" She didn't wait for the answer—she saw it in my face. She smiled, handed me keys, and got in on the passenger side.

I slid in, turned things on, and reached for the gizmo that works the folding top. She said, "Leave it open."

"It'll get nippy up coast."

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"That's why I brought my stole." She'd had me put it over her as we left the restaurant. "I love to drive the coast with the top down."

It was all right by me. Everything was fine. I was driving a beautiful woman in a beautiful car to Ojai—which all I knew about was that it's 80 miles or so from L.A., and a lot of rich people live there.

With that car, the pearls, the stole, she qualified.

We got on the freeway, and it got nippier, but was beautiful—clear dark sky, thin slice of moon, glittering sea. Not many cars on the freeway, easy driving.

I glanced at her, liking the way her red hair flipped around in the breeze. "Tell me about yourself—like what do you do?"

"Not much, when my husband's in town."

Something went *THONNKKK!* in my chest. I should have known. Things don't go on as great as this evening had gone so far. There's always a stray tack somewhere in the stardust, waiting to be stepped on.

But her remark had a reverse twist. I asked, "Is he in town now?"

"No, he's in Rome."

"What's he doing in Rome?"

"Sleeping, probably. That's the most fun he has. But he's in pretty good health for a man in his seventies."

I looked the obvious question at her.

She gave a little shrug, and a crooked smile, and her hand came up and fiddled with the stole, then moved on and up to the necklace.

I drove a while. A few cars passed us, we passed a few—as I said, not much traffic. "He's rich, huh?"

"He's a banker."

"But he's in Rome."

"Far as I know."

"So you're on the lonely side."

"Only when he's home. When he's away, I stop being lonely." She looked at me full-face. "Like right now. I'm not lonely now."

I wasn't either.

Then her eyes slid from my face and the look she had been giving me was gone, and now her eyes were two gleaming circles of fear.

She whispered tautly, "Down! Get down!" And that's what she was doing—falling over sideward to the window, arms covering her red head.

She could do that, I couldn't. Not while piloting 6000 pounds of Cad along the freeway.

I looked in the rear-view mirror.

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Lights were coming fast in the next lane. It was a greenish sedan. It pulled even. I turned my head, glanced at the dark shape of the driver—dark glasses, sharp profile, eyes straight ahead. He stayed there, keeping the green sedan even with us.

Something bright caught the edge of my glance, and it slid back along the car. I saw bright metal, and it stuck out of a hand that rested on the open rear window. It was a gun, looking at me.

I didn't think, just reacted—hit the brake and rode it, the Cad slewing to the right. Over the skriek of tires I heard a sharp clean pop—and something was happening to the windshield in front of me. It was spider-webbing—and caught in the middle of the sudden web was a hole.

But the skid got my full attention. I eased off the brake, went along with the skid, felt things start back under control, saw I was off the freeway on the shoulder, made a twitch of the wheel here, then there, braking down now firm and steady—and we came to a stop on the far edge of the shoulder.

The green sedan wasn't alongside any more. I looked through the cracked windshield and saw its tail-lights going away very fast down the middle lane.

I took a few deep breaths, then reached out and down and touched the mink.

"You all right?"

The mink moved, came up under my hand. "Yes."

I looked at her tight, white face. She closed her eyes a few seconds, then rubbed her cheeks, and some color came back into them.

She murmured, "Have they gone on?"

"Yes. Who were they?"

"Some of Kay's men."

"Kay?"

"A man I know."

"Kay's a man?"

She looked beyond me. The terror was out of her eyes. The shadow lay over them, but a softness showed through it. She murmured, "Yes. Kay's a man."

I looked at the hole in the windshield. "Why'd he want to kill us?"

"He didn't." She was still looking off. "It was just to—remind me."

"Of what?"

"Things of the past."

This mess I'd got into was getting nothing but thicker. Maybe Kay didn't want to kill us but that was a real hole in the windshield.

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An inch farther to the right and it would have been in my head, and there'd have been a hell of a car crash, and Barbara would have wound up as dead as me. I said, "Kay seems like a pretty unconventional guy."

Her lips made a slight curve. "Yes. Never dull, never predictable. But believe me—if he'd told them to kill us, we'd be dead. Snecker put the bullet just where he wanted to."

"Snecker? The gunman?"

She seemed to know all the characters involved. I was the new boy in class, knowing no one.

She said, "Can you see to drive?"

"I guess so." It was distorted through the webby windshield, but navigable.

"Then let's get on to Ojai."

I wasn't sold on that notion. The green sedan could be up ahead, pulled over to the shoulder, waiting for us. "We better take the next ramp and get back to L.A."

She said quietly, "No. They've done all they meant to do."

In this deep, I might as well go deeper, try to find out what lay at the bottom. If she was wrong and those guys wanted another try at us, they could do it as well toward L.A. as toward Ojai—so there was no big advantage to turning back. I started the car. "Tell me who Kay is, and what's going on."

"I will. When we get to Ojai."

I looked in the mirror to see if it was clear to turn onto the freeway, then heard a yell up forward, hit the brake, and saw I'd nearly piled into a panel truck pulled in front of me on the shoulder. A guy jacking up for a rear-tire change yelled, "You blind or something?"

"Fogged windshield." I pulled around him, got out on the freeway, leaving him squawking insults.

We passed the Ventura turnoffs and took the turn to Ojai, which the sign said was 13 miles. I drove steady and careful, paying attention now and seeing fairly well through the windshield. I kept checking the mirror, but I saw no green sedan.

We got near the town and she had me take a side road. We climbed a while, and it was low estate homes set in trees—this was the richest part of a rich man's town, high up over it. We came to a long stone fence and approached an open iron gate. Barbara nodded, gestured. I turned in.

We drove on a curving road through trees. There was nothing but trees—no lawn. The trees grew right up to a big two-story adobe,

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topped with red tile. A wide drive went off around, which would be the garage area. "You want me to put it in there?"

"No, drive on past the house—I feel like walking back."

I did as she said and stopped on the side of the curved road. I gave her the keys and we got out, and walked 200 feet back to the house. She used a key and we went in.

Stylish furnishings, oil paintings, wall hangings, everything old-Spanish style. A wide, low, very expensive and classy main room.

She took off the stole and dropped it in a chair. "It's cool and lovely out. Let's sit by the pool."

I followed her out a big oak door. We were on a patio, where there were a couple of deckchairs. It wasn't nippy like on the coast—Ojai is in a valley, inland. The thin moon was caught in the tops of some tall trees and things were shadowy, the big rectangular pool before us darkly shining.

Barbara went to a switch, flipped it, and lights sprang on from under the house eaves and from the branches of trees near the pool. That wasn't so romantic as moonlight but romance right now wasn't what I was after—that could come later, if it came. Right now I felt better with the lights on because it meant less chance the guy with the gun could come sneaking through the trees. She might be sure that the guys in the green sedan had knocked off work for the night, but I wasn't.

I sat down in one of the chairs. "Tell me about Kay."

"Kay." She stood by me, gazing at the diving tower at the far end of the pool. It was a high tower. "We met in Yugoslavia. That was years ago." The shadow was over her eyes and she had an odd smile. "I look at the diving tower," she said softly, "and I think of then."

I didn't see the connection. Maybe it would become clear. I said, "It's really a high tower." A diving board stuck out from it.

She said, "Twenty feet high."

"Are you a diver?"

"I love to dive. I used to dive off cliffs at Rijeka." So that was the connection. "A lifetime ago . . . so much since then. So very much."

She was looking down at me. Her look was the look you dream a beautiful woman will give you. It got closer. Her face was coming down on mine. Her whole body was coming down on me. Now she was all over me. I had a lapful of California gold, and her mouth had become part of mine or vice-versa. My ears thumped, my hair felt electrified, I was like disappearing under tumbling red hair. Then suddenly her soft weight was off me. I opened my eyes, saw

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her staring back toward the house. I craned around the back of the chair to see. A mahogany-colored giant in a seedy black suit stood there in the doorway.

"Har-Tai?" Barbara said softly. "You're back?"

The giant made a gurgling noise in his throat.

Barbara murmured to me, "Don't be frightened."

I saw no reason not to be. He was about seven feet tall and had hands in proportion. They twitched. Bright black eyes were fixed on my face.

She said, her voice brisk now, "Bring drinks, Har-Tai. The usual for me, whiskey and water for Mr. Spear."

The giant turned, lumped back in the house.

I let out a few breaths, and said, "Who's he?"

"Har-Tai. From Madagascar. They tore his tongue out."

I blinked at that. She didn't elaborate. "Excuse me, while I slip into something less formal."

As not too much of her was restricted by the maroon dress, I wondered what she had in mind. I watched her move across the patio, through the oak door.

I sat there gazing at the lighted pool and the tall tower at the end, and the trees growing close on the far side. I wondered who had torn Har-Tai's tongue out, and why, and wondered about Kay, who left reminders that ruined windshields. I didn't know how this night was going to wind up. It seemed a night for sudden happenings and odd people—and Barbara was certainly changeable, as to mood and clothes.

A snuffle sounded close behind my head. Something told me it meant trouble—I went to instinct, dived forward out of the chair, and fell flat on the tile.

Pushing up, I threw a look, saw the Madagascan just completing the follow-through of a stiff-finger jab that would have dented my skull as when you squeeze a beer can.

I scrambled to hands and knees. He was coming at me, hands spread. I had no time to ponder things—I rolled on my back, got my feet up, and kicked from the shoulders.

And damned if he didn't slip in a wet place and slide into my kick, taking it in the belly, and of course continuing his slide and bending my legs back over my head so I rolled on my shoulders all the way over, winding up on my knees with my face in the tile—and wet all over, because he'd gone belly-whacking into the pool.

He made gurgling sounds and beat his arms around. I got up and

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watched him slap water—he wasn't a swimmer. But he sucked in a suitcase full of air, went under, and I guess crawled along the bottom because his hands shot up and gripped the edge of the pool. I went over to stamp them loose and Barbara's voice sounded sharply, "No!"

She had come out the door, in a frothy green thing that kind of floated around her. She said, "I'll take care of him."

The Madagascan's hands were followed by head, shoulders, and chest, and he was heaving himself out of the pool. I stepped back toward the house.

Barbara stood quiet, and as he got out, shook himself, blew water, and then started for me, she said, low and compelling, "Stop, Har-Tai!"

He blinked, looked at her, stopped.

"Go. Go to trees. Spend night in trees."

His shoulders drooped, so did his head. His mahogany face kind of broke up.

"Go," said Barbara, pointing off.

He spread his hands in an appealing way, then turned, and in draggy fashion walked around the pool, and disappeared into the trees.

She gazed after him. "He'll weep all night, out of shame for losing his cool, but he'll be all right in the morning."

"Why'd he want to attack me?"

She gave me a look that held a lot of meaning, but I wasn't sure what it meant. "It doesn't matter. He won't try it again. Not tonight."

"Nothing seems to matter. Getting shot at didn't matter, now this doesn't matter—"

She said in that low voice, "Things that are over don't matter. All that matters are things still to come."

She was at the edge of the pool, staring in, her attitude one of intensity. She gestured. I came over, looked in the direction she was looking, toward the deep end—and saw a body. Face down, near the bottom. It had a white shirt, dark pants, shoes. Whoever it was hadn't gone in for a swim.

I said, "Time we called the cops."

"Yes." Her look was steady. "Tell them the Bacon place. Don't mention Kay or Har-Tai. While you're phoning, I'll pull the body out."

I was about to tell her that *she* should phone, she was the hostess here—and no need to pull this latest guest out, he could wait where

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he was for the cops. But she moved fast and there was a puff of filmy green, then a neat splash, and the frothy thing was on the tile and she was in the water, a smooth pink fish in a pearl necklace flashing toward the body.

I watched her go under, then turned and hurried through the oak door, thinking that if I made the call fast and short I could be back in time to help her get the body out.

I looked around the soft-lit living room and spotted the phone on a corner table. I went over, picked it up, and there was a stabby pop and the phone flew out of my hand. I hit the floor as another pop stabbed. A heavy armchair was near and I scooted behind it, staying low. The third pop went through the chair, zizzed past my nose, and thunked into the wall.

Then everything was quiet, except I heard a kind of thumping splash from outside, then quieter slurping sounds. That would be Barbara heaving the corpse out of the pool and dragging it up on the tile.

Some time passed. I got to my hands and knees, went forward a little, and peeked around the chair. Everything stayed quiet, except for the outside slurping. I got my legs under me and came up slowly behind the chair. This time the gunman couldn't have missed—so it was clear he had gone.

I took in air for a while. Then I walked across the room and out the door. Barbara, back in her green froth, was standing near the pool, rubbing her cheeks and gazing down at the body at her feet. It lay on its back and the handle of a dagger stuck out the middle of its chest.

I went over and looked down at the face of a fit-looking old man with a lot of gray hair. "Your husband?"

She nodded.

"I thought he was in Rome."

"No, he's here. Did you get the police?"

"No. The phone was shot out of my hand."

She was quiet, her full lower lip hooked by her teeth, and then she murmured, "So it's all to be settled tonight."

"What is?"

She grabbed my arm, stared up at me, and her eyes were wide and shiny with that fear I'd seen before. "Are you going to help me?"

"What do you want me to do?"

"Drive to Ojai."

"To the cops?"

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"Too late for that. Drive down the road we came up till you see a sign that says Munson's Hogs. Take the road there and drive till the road ends in barbed wire. Go through the wire and there's a farmhouse with a well in front. Have you got that?"

"Farmhouse with a well."

"Find a stone, drop it in the well. Wait thirty seconds, then drop two more stones, one after the other. Then wait. Someone will come out."

"Of the well?"

"No, the farmhouse."

"Who?"

"The only one who can help me now."

"Kay?"

Her voice had a ragged undertone of hysteria. "Don't you understand that time is all we have to work with—and it's almost gone?"

Her urgency got me in motion. I went through the door, through the living room, out the front door, and started for the Cad, parked in the drive 200 feet away. The moonlight picked it out brightly. If the sharpshooter was out there in the trees I'd be an easy target. But no pop stabbed the silence.

I knew where I was going to drive. Not to Munson's hog farm—to the Ojai police station, where I'd lay it all out for the cops and they would take it from there. This whole thing had become too sinister and confusing for me to handle by myself.

I ran toward the Cad and when I was 60 feet from it there was a terrific flash, a giant concussion, and I was knocked over on my back. I scrambled up—parts of the Cad were flying around. I ran back to the house, turned, saw pieces and wheels still flying, and where the car had stood, there was only a black patch on the road.

I went through the house and out the door, yelling, "The car blew up!"

But she wasn't there, and neither was the body of her husband. The patio was deserted except for the two deckchairs.

Movement across the pool caught the edge of my glance. I looked fast, saw the giant Madagascan loping away toward the trees. Slung over his shoulder was the body of the dead man.

I shouted, "Where do you think you're going with that?"

He stopped, turned.

"Where's Barbara?" I called.

His teeth flashed at me. Then he turned, and with his soggy burden disappeared into the trees.

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I went back in the house. She wasn't in the front room. I started up the stairs. The phone rang.

It had been knocked out of my hand and I hadn't hung it up afterward. But from the stairs I could see it back in its cradle on the corner table, with a bullet hole in the mouthpiece.

I watched it. It kept ringing.

I walked toward it wondering if shots would start popping. But it kept ringing. I picked it up and said, "Hello?"

I heard a whispery laugh.

I said, "Barbara?"

The laugh again.

"Who's laughing?"

A voice whispered, "Too bad for you, Peeper."

It flashed to me—this whole mess could be a mistake in identification—the shots hadn't been meant for me but somebody else. I said, "You got the wrong guy. I'm—" The phone went click.

I hung up. I stood a minute, trying to figure things out.

"Barbara?" I called again. But everything stayed quiet.

The best thing was to get to Ojai, to the cops. I started toward the front door, planning to get out on the road, flag down somebody—

I heard a scream. It came from outside, at the pool. It turned into words: "Help me! For God's sake, help me!"

I ran through the oak door, looked around the patio, saw nothing, heard nothing more.

I stared at the pool, saw something splash into it.

A drop of red.

I looked up. Drops of red were falling from the end of the high diving board, falling into the pool.

The board was bent—it hadn't been bent before.

Bright drops of red, glistening.

"Barbara?"

I couldn't see who or what lay on the diving board. I took various positions on the patio, but couldn't see. If I went in the house, up to the second story, and looked out, maybe I could see.

I stopped. A big dog was in the doorway. Not big, huge. A giant black dog.

He didn't come at me. He just stood there watching. His snout wrinkled, and from deep inside him came an ominous rumbling.

I backed away a little. I held out my hand, palms up, the way you show you're not going to throw anything.

The snarling got higher-pitched. The hairs on his face seemed to

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get spikier, as if he were charging himself up. More creases showed in his snout. He started to walk, slow and stiff-legged, toward me.

I backed along the side of the pool, toward the deep end. He kept walking toward me. I moved around the corner of the pool, saw his eyes get a sudden crazed look, as if he couldn't stand the anticipation any longer, and was going to make his lunge. I twisted and leaped, a standing broad jump, hoping the ladder to the tower was near enough, and it was—barely. My fingers hooked on a rung, my body swung under, and I pushed up straight and ran up the ladder, running till I was sure I was clear, then looked down. The dog was stretched as far up the ladder as he could go, front paws on the step below me, teeth snapping eight inches below my shoes.

I got a quarter from my pocket and tossed it when his jaws were open at their widest and the coin must have slid down into his throat because he gagged, got a glassy look, and fell backward off the ladder.

He got up all hunched over, choking, shoulders shaking. Finally he gave a low moan, then turned and walked away, not stiff-legged now but shaky and droop-hipped. He got to the patio door, gave me a long look, but the fire was out of him. Then he disappeared inside the house.

I looked in and over the pool. Drops of red, falling in front of me, were splashing into the pool.

"Barbara?"

I didn't want it to be Barbara, but if it was I'd better know now.

I went on up the ladder.

I put my face over the top.

She wasn't there. Nobody was.

I looked along the length of board, and a big flat chunk of iron was out there, making it bend. At the end was a small plastic bag. There were holes in it. Red stuff was leaking out of the holes, puddling around the bag, then slipping, drop by drop, from the end of the board.

I didn't know what to think.

Then I felt something stinging both my palms. It flashed on me that one time when I came home late and turned on a lamp it didn't light. I had reached under to feel if the bulb was loose and found there was no bulb. I stuck my finger in the socket and got bombed across the room. That was what I was getting now—an electric jolt from the ladder rails.

I thought I was. I wasn't. All I was getting was an electric stroke.

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Now I got the jolt.

I gave a yell and snatched my hands free, which often you can't do, you just stick to what's jolting you and get cooked. I was lucky. Also I was falling, and I figured I had about 20 feet to wonder about things—then would come crash time.

I waited for the hard tile, trying to tell myself there are worse ways to go. Then I wasn't falling any more. I was lying on something, and it wasn't tile.

Maybe it was a cloud. Maybe you don't remember when you get the fatal knock, maybe your last feeling just fades out, and next thing you know you're lying on a cloud.

That was my first vague thought. Then I came full to reality and knew I wasn't on a cloud. It was something slick and slippery, and soft—I was on something rubbery.

I sat up and looked around. I saw people. They were making noises, they were laughing and whooping.

I heard Barbara's voice—"You okay?" There she was, in her frothy thing, grinning at me.

I started to pick out other faces—there were about 20 people. A foot higher than any other face was Har-Tai's. He gave me a big grin, a wave, called, "Great going!" He must have grown a new tongue.

I saw the gray-haired guy, upright, not wearing the knife in his chest. He had a drink in his hand. Most of the people seemed to have drinks in their hands.

A couple of guys came over, stuck out their hands, took mine and pulled, and I stood up in the rubbery thing, stumbled around on it, and was pulled clear. It was a thick rubber mattress.

A guy handed me a drink. I didn't know if it was bourbon or what, and didn't care. I drank it down. It was bourbon.

Barbara, bright-eyed, said, "I was afraid you'd catch on at the beginning, with the lobster truck in front of us or just behind us all the way from L.A., and pulled up in front of us with the lights out while we were parked off the freeway."

"Yeah," I said. "Lobster truck. Right." I remembered pulling around a panel truck after having the windshield shot up. I hadn't noticed it was a lobster truck. Nor had I noticed the truck on the freeway from L.A.

A furtive voice on the other side of me said, "Stroka genius. Like I said—the guy's a genius."

I turned and it was my agent, Finnegan. He was grinning but

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shifty-eyed as always—he'd look shifty buying cookies from a Girl Scout. "Bora said you had a great build but as an actor you stunk. Said the only way to get life in you was to have you not know you're acting. Then maybe you'd react to things like someone alive, not made of plaster—and all the other actors would go without scripts and react to your reactions. And it would be realism like it's never been done before."

"I was bugged," said Barbara. I blinked at her. "Bugged for sound. From the time we met at Flupo's."

She fingered her pearls, grinned.

"The pearls were bugged?"

She nodded. "Great natural dialogue. It's all on tape, just needs a word change here and there."

"So it all began at Flupo's, huh? With hidden cameras there?"

"Uh huh. Bora arranged it."

"And the dog was a trained dog?"

"Sure," said a guy standing near. "Mitzi wouldn't hurt a flea."

I had the picture now—or at least the general outline. The lobster truck was a film truck, and all around the pool here and in the main room were hidden cameras, as at Flupo's. But some impressions I still had to shake around till they formed up . . . I wanted another drink, and said so. A guy took my glass and scurried away.

Then suddenly across the patio came the genius himself. All five feet four of him. He bounced up to me, jumped, grabbed my neck, pulled himself up, hung on me, and gave me slobbery kisses on the cheeks.

There was cheering and applause. He continued to hang on my neck and slobber. I've had experience with emotional directors, so I put up with it. Finally he unlatched me. I wiped my sleeve over my face. "Thanks. Were the bullets real?"

"Everything real!"

The guy handed me my drink. I swallowed it and handed it back for a refill. I said to Pelicularu, "So a guy shot an inch from my head, blew a phone out of my hand—weren't you taking a big chance with real bullets?"

"No worry. Great marksman. Retired from Mafia, seek new career in pictures. I give him chance—splendid shooter. Meet Izador."

He beamed at a thin scruffy guy with a bony face who had dead blue eyes.

I said, "Hi, Izador. Good shooting."

He looked at me with his dead eyes. I smiled. He didn't. I doubt

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he ever had. Pelicularu gave him a pat on the back and he went away.

I drank down my third drink. "The blowup of the Cad—that was real too?"

"Yah. Terrific scene—like whole screen blow up in audience face!"

I was handed a fresh glass. Finnegan said, "Bora told me not to peep—and I was a clam." He grinned, shifting his eyes everywhere.

I said to the genius, "The ladder rails were charged?"

"Yah. Important you reach top of ladder, look over—we have zoom-boom on your face—look of fear, then poozlement. Then we give you jolt in the hands." He grinned delightedly. "Make great closing scene."

"That's the end of the picture?"

"Yah."

"I look at a leaky sack of red paint and fall off the ladder?"

"Audience not see sack of paint—just see last look on your phi-zoozel—the shlock, the shlock!"

"Shock."

"Whatever. Then you drop off ladder. That the end. Audience ask theirself—what he see? What give him such a look? Audience let own sick imagination fill in—so they come up with more sickening finish than even Pelicularu could cook up for them!"

"That's genius," said Finnegan in a reverent voice. And everybody in earshot murmured that was what it was, genius.

Pelicularu didn't argue. He stared into space at private visions—probably a dozen Academy nominations.

I'd finished my drink and stuck out my glass for someone to fill it. Someone took it. I said, "What's the theme of the picture?"

He came back from space. "I dunno. Don't matter. Up to critics to figger."

Everybody murmured again about genius.

I said, "None of it seems to make any sense."

He leaped, hung on my neck again. "Right! Just like *Big Schlepp!* So is great picture for today and for evermore! Greater and greater, as world gradual go *kaputsky*!"

Everybody cheered.

I got my fresh drink and downed it.

The night went on—a party celebrating the quickest filming of a major epic in Hollywood history. Everybody got drunk—me the fastest, because of low resistance due to a pretty harrowing evening. People got loud and started singing. Then some people were saying

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that the most artistic part of this whole masterpiece was Barbara's informal swim, and would she give a repeat performance? I don't know if she did—just about then I passed out and fell backward onto the rubber mattress.

I spent the rest of the night there, coming to with the sun high. Everybody was gone except one guy staggering around the patio picking up empties, shaking them, then tossing them into the empty pool.

He was the driver of the lobster truck that had done the freeway filming. We walked around to the garage area, got in the truck, and he gave me a ride back to Hollywood.

That was a year ago. I'm still living in the same place on Orange Drive. I've had a few commercials, but not much else since *Catastrophe.*

It got great reviews. Critics said it had real relevance and profound meaning, and was undoubtedly a work of high cinematic art. So nobody came to see it. So they missed the car blowup, the wild dog, that great final shot of my face in shock—and Barbara's swim.

Pelicularu went back to Rashpudlovik, saying America was ten years behind his visions.

I called Barbara a few times, and we made dates, but never seemed to get together. I guess it wasn't our destiny.

Har-Tai and the wild dog, they're pretty busy in horror films.

Izador dropped out of sight.

Hooray for Hollywood.

"Q"

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This is the 554th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . Many famous historical and literary figures have appeared in EQMM in the guise (or disguise) of detectives. This story is a particularly daring one to have been written by a newcomer—not many unpublished writers (or published ones, for that matter) would have faced and accepted the challenge of portraying Franz Kafka as a detective.

Franz Kafka was an Austrian novelist and short-story writer, author of THE METAMORPHOSIS *and* THE TRIAL. *His work dealt with "the implacable fatality of life" . . .*

Our new writer, Charles West, Jr., is in his late twenties. His father was a career army man, and Charles Jr. grew up on army bases in the U.S. and abroad, chiefly in Germany and Japan. Presently Mr. West is an English teacher at Edison High School in Fresno, California; he is also the varsity soccer coach. His hobbies include soccer, motion pictures, and reading . . .

FRANZ KAFKA, DETECTIVE: The Bird of Ill Omen

by CHARLES WEST, JR.

I stopped by the Workers Insurance Institute in the Porschitscherstrasse on Thursday to see my friend Franz Kafka. He did not seem surprised to see me and greeted me casually.

"I was just thinking of you," he said. "How would you like to accompany me on a small excursion to the countryside—to a village called Cheb, in northern Bohemia?" he asked, his large gray eyes widening under thick dark eyebrows.

While I considered Franz my friend, I never imagined he would invite me to accompany him to the country for the weekend. I was

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introduced to Kafka by my father who knew him through his office. Although I was only a university student, Kafka always treated me as an equal, even among his small group of friends such as Max Brod, Franz Werfel, and Felix Weltsch. I knew he had often traveled with them, especially with Brod, to France and the Italian lakes.

"I have some small business to conduct, but we should have much of the time to ourselves," he said.

I agreed to go instantly. The German industrial areas of northern Bohemia were not exactly my idea of the ideal place for a holiday. However, both Franz and I welcomed the opportunity for a change of scenery, a chance to escape from our work and the city itself.

I let Kafka make the travel arrangements and planned to meet him at the railway station the next morning. I arrived at the agreed-upon time, but Franz was not there. He appeared about fifteen minutes later, looking fatigued and apologizing profusely. "I meant to be on time, but a cinder or something caught in my throat, causing a somewhat violent coughing attack together with sweating. I had to lean against a wall until the attack passed."

Kafka dismissed the convulsion as nothing of importance. I almost suggested that he consult a doctor, but decided against it. Franz was peculiarly suspicious of doctors and their diagnoses.

Kafka engaged a compartment for the journey to Cheb. The Insurance Institute paid for one-half since Franz was going on business. Kafka paid for the other half despite my protestations.

Having made the trip before, Kafka was known to the conductors and stewards. He spoke in Czech with them. He spoke and wrote Czech better than I, who, having learned it as a spoken language, used it more colloquially. He used both Czech and German in his work, but more German. Although he used both languages interchangeably, both had the accent of the other, so to Germans he was a Czech, and to the Czechs he was a German.

As the legal representative of the Insurance Institute Kafka made frequent business trips. Franz was very good at his job and was respected by colleagues and superiors alike. He worked in several departments at the Institute and many of his reports were published in the professional journals of the field. He was an expert in the areas of accident insurance and industrial safety. He also proposed such measures as compulsory accident insurance and even, of all things, insurance for motorcars.

The people at the Workers Insurance Institute didn't always un-

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derstand Kafka. My father once told me a story of an old laborer who lost his leg in an industrial accident. The poor man engaged an inept lawyer who seriously bungled the old man's case. At the last moment, however, a prominent Prague lawyer took over the case and redrafted the suit so that the poor fellow won a handsome settlement.

The lawyer, it was learned later, had been instructed and paid by Kafka so that as the lawyer for the Insurance Institute, Kafka could lose honorably and the old laborer could be provided for fairly. Some of his colleagues say he is an incompetent lawyer; others say he is a great man.

I brought one book and one magazine with me for the trip. The magazine contained a short story by Franz Kafka.

"Another proof of my weaknesses and foolishness published for the world to see, all because my friends, led by Max Brod, have contrived to pass my scribblings off as literature." Franz said nothing more about the magazine or the story. I must confess, I do not know what to make of his attitudes toward his own writing.

The other book was a detective novel.

"I didn't know you were attracted to such things," he said.

"Do you disapprove?" I asked.

"No, of course not. Dostoevski wrote something of a detective novel in *Crime and Punishment.* And *Hamlet* is, after all, a crime drama. My only point of dissatisfaction with detective stories is that they are always preoccupied with crimes hidden by bizarre circumstances. I wonder how many crimes happen every day that escape detection because they are without those circumstances which cause them to stand out in everyday life."

A few minutes later he added, "Detective stories contribute to the popular delusion that every mystery is solvable and results in a legal and moral conclusion."

"What sort of business is this?" I asked him.

"A lawsuit. A man died of gas inhalation in an apartment building insured by our office. Although the local police report the death as a suicide, the widow has brought an action which, although not in the proper legal form, must be followed through with the correct procedure."

"And the purpose of your visit?"

"To interview those concerned and to inspect the premises and

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determine if the condition of the building could have contributed to a gas leak."

In his vocation Kafka absorbed a great deal of knowledge about architecture and building safety. His work in accident-prevention measures often involved disputes with factory managers and landlords who refused to install necessary safety devices and to insure their workers and tenants properly.

"Do you remember Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther?*" I asked. "It created a wave of suicides among young people after its publication."

"I'm not so sure it *created* the suicides. Perhaps the suicides were already created, and Goethe merely set them off. Maybe Goethe and *Young Werther* had nothing to do with them and some scholar drew the wrong correlation years later."

"Could this have been an accident?" I asked.

"Accident is what we call the coincidence of events when we do not know the cause. Nothing happens in the world without cause. Accidents happen only in our minds because our perceptions are limited by a lack of knowledge."

"But what of chance?" I asked.

He smiled. "Chance is merely a struggle against ourselves."

"Can we ever win this struggle?"

"Not entirely," he answered, the small smile reappearing.

We arrived in Cheb in the late evening. Rather than pursue his business immediately we went to the inn and got a room. As we lay awake in the dark waiting to fall asleep I was startled by a sharp shrill noise that seemed to be coming from everywhere. Kafka informed me they were crickets. How was a city dweller like myself to know that?

"You surprise me, my friend. Mere Bohemian crickets scare you?" He was quite amused.

The next morning we walked to the building where the death occurred. It was an old house, possibly the home of a noble or wealthy landowner at one time. Now, poorly maintained, it had been converted into a group of flats.

We went first to the apartment of Frau and Herr Loos, who lived below the flat of the deceased man. The couple were German, probably Bavarian. I wasn't sure, but I'm certain Franz knew. The husband was an owlish, slightly built man who, for the most part, remained silent. His wife glowered at Franz and me while we were

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there, and seemed extremely annoyed at our intrusion. When Franz asked her a question she answered curtly, frowning as she spoke.

"Were you home on the day Herr Fredersohn died?" he asked.

"No, I was working," Frau Loos replied.

"What time did you get home?"

"About five thirty—no, at six thirty."

I recalled from earlier conversations with Franz that the body was found about six. I wanted to ask if she smelled gas when she arrived home. I hesitated, as it was not really any of my business, but Kafka asked the question.

"Did you smell gas when you arrived home?" he asked.

"No!" She answered quickly and without comment.

As he was not getting any information from the wife, Kafka turned his attention to the husband, whose silence had almost caused me to forget he was in the room.

"Were you at work that afternoon as well?" he asked the man.

The wife started to answer: "He was—"

"Let him answer, please," Kafka said quickly. His voice was sharp and had the quality of a command. It was a tone of voice I had never heard from Kafka.

The husband answered nervously. I was not sure if he was more intimidated by Kafka or by his wife.

"I work at home," he said, pointing to a writing desk. "I do accounting and bookkeeping."

"Then you were home all that day?"

"Yes, but I didn't smell any gas," he said, anticipating Kafka's next question.

As the husband answered, Kafka began looking about the apartment, at the stove, the walls, and the ceiling. He walked to a window, the bottom half of which was boarded up. The wife explained the window had been broken by a stone thrown by some passing boys. There was a fair-sized birdcage suspended from a beam in the high ceiling, but there was no bird in it.

"Did your bird escape?" Kafka asked.

"No, it died," the man said immediately. His wife shot him a piercing look and he slunk behind her.

"It probably caught a virus," the wife said. "The weather can become rather harsh in this part of the country."

"What kind of bird was it?"

"A jackdaw," the husband interjected. "It's similar to a crow, only smaller."

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He received the same look from his wife that he received before and became silent.

"Did you know," Franz said more to me than to the others, "that the Czech work for jackdaw is *kavka,* which was the original spelling of my family's name. In Czech superstition it is a bird of ill omen, bad fortune." He seemed oddly pleased by this. "I'm a jackdaw," he smiled. "The jackdaw is generally a sturdy animal," he added.

We next went to the apartment of the dead man and his widow which was directly above. It was originally the attic of the home, now transformed into a small flat by the present owner to squeeze more income from the property. It was smaller than the apartment below and better kept. The furniture was much the same, but this apartment had a bookshelf lining one wall. The majority of the books were on engineering and science.

The widow greeted us cordially, more so than her neighbor despite her grief. It seemed clear to me she was determined to clear up the question of her husband's suicide, not so much for the settlement as for her husband's honor. The local policeman, Inspector Abel, was also there and we introduced ourselves.

Frau Fredersohn was not a particularly beautiful woman. Her face was plain but her skin was fair and her features well defined. I'm sure if she were rich, the proper combination of clothes, hair, and surroundings would have made her quite attractive. Even without those she had the most striking eyes. To call them blue would not be telling the truth. They approached violet in color and seemed to have the ability to look through a person.

I noticed Franz staring at her. The reason occurred to me later. Frau Fredersohn resembled photographs I had seen of Felice Bauer, to whom Franz was engaged to be married a few years ago. Kafka had never spoken of her to me, and it was only through conversations with Max Brod that I knew anything of her at all. Brod remarked that the couple was at once mismatched and well suited to each other. They met at Brod's house and saw each other for five years, but for some reason the romance was doomed to failure. The couple went so far as to rent an apartment in Prague. Max Brod implied that it was Kafka who broke off the engagement. Kafka continued to steal furtive glances at Frau Fredersohn the rest of the time we were there.

The police inspector was in a hurry to leave and gave the official version of the story without being asked.

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"The body was found lying near the oven. The door of the oven was open and his hands and forearms were dirty, apparently from the inside of the oven, leading us to believe he had been tampering with the inside of the oven or had his head in there."

"Approximately what time was this?" Kafka asked.

"I arrived at 6:10 exactly," the policeman answered. "The time is always the first thing I note when filing a report, especially a death report."

"Thank you." Kafka shook the policeman's hand and Inspector Abel excused himself and left.

"Was the gas on when you discovered the body?" Kafka asked the woman.

"The smell was very strong. When I came in the room, I first ran to the window to open it and then to the stove to shut the gas."

"And you turned the dials to OFF?"

The woman hesitated. "I must have, although I don't remember."

"I remember going from the window to the stove before I became unconscious, but I do not remember actually shutting off the valves. I'm not sure how long I was unconscious but when I recovered, the gas had dissipated and the valves were off." She paused. "And Jan was dead. But it wasn't suicide. It couldn't be. There was no reason."

Her voice was rising and becoming hysterical. She collected herself and continued, "Jan was always fixing things around here. Something must have been wrong with the gas lines." Her eyes pleaded with Kafka to believe her. His face showed no expression.

"Is this flat difficult to heat?" Kafka asked as he inspected the apartment much as he inspected the one below.

She was confused by the question but nevertheless answered. "No, it is on the top floor of the building. All the heat from the lower floors rises to heat this one. It makes it quite comfortable in the winter, but it can be unpleasant in the summer."

"Thank you for your time, Frau Fredersohn. I shall call tomorrow to inform you of my decision regarding your lawsuit." Kafka bowed slightly and began to walk toward the door.

Frau Fredersohn looked apprehensive, as though she believed Kafka had already made up his mind and was merely postponing the bad news. "Do you think—"

Franz interrupted her before she could say anything else. "I will return tomorrow. I will say no more at this time."

As we walked down the stairs Franz spoke about the building. "This building is old, possibly over sixty years. As with many old

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buildings, additions were made to modernize. The plumbing is an example of that. The gas lines and ventilation are other examples. The building was not designed to accommodate these facilities. The owner, in order to make these *improvements,* neglected the maintenance of the rest of the building. The floors, ceilings, and walls are all badly in need of repair." He pointed out cracks in the walls near the baseboards and several loose floorboards.

Kafka was unusually silent for the rest of the walk back to the inn.

Late that night I awoke to find him sitting in a chair, fully clothed.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Is this inquiry keeping you awake?"

"No, actually I'm an insomniac."

I remarked that insomnia is a common illness.

"Or, perhaps, a sin," he said without explanation. I remember that he once said that many people considered sleep a symbol of death. Perhaps insomnia is a symptom of the fear of death. "I often have sleepless nights. I usually spend the time writing or thinking."

"What were you thinking about just now?"

"Suicide," he answered.

"Franz!"

He interpreted my thoughts and laughed. "Not my own suicide, my friend. Suicide in general." He laughed for several moments at this.

"What are your thoughts?" I asked.

He remained silent for what seemed like a long time and then spoke without preface. "Suicide is a form of egotism combined with hate. The suicide believes his loss will inflict the greatest injury on the person or persons he wishes to hurt. It is an act of frustration and impotence. He feels he cannot do anything else. He rationalizes the act as the last and only logical course of action open to him. The act requires no courage, only despair."

I began to ask him a question, but changed my mind. I was not really sure of what to say, or even if I should say anything at all. Nothing more was said between us that night.

The next morning we had a light breakfast of coffee and rolls. Kafka sent a message to Inspector Abel from the inn to meet us at the Loos apartment in an hour.

At breakfast and while walking we talked of many things—the

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village, literature, anecdotes—all the things friends talk about. He seemed refreshed by the brief stay in the country. The escape from the city was almost therapeutic. I suggested that he make a permanent move to the country.

"It's not the location that refreshes me, but the change. In six months of country life I would become bored and depressed, longing for the excitement and stimulation of Prague. It is not where you live that determines the quality of life but rather what you do with your time. I am quite satisfied with Prague."

When we arrived at the building, Inspector Abel was waiting at the steps. Together we walked to the flat of Frau Loos and her husband. Frau Loos seemed almost shocked to see us, and Herr Loos appeared frightened.

I remained silent as Kafka and Inspector Abel greeted the couple. Kafka apologized for the intrusion.

"I just wished to demonstrate to Inspector Abel the events of Jan Fredersohn's death as they could have occurred," said Franz. "Frau Loos stated she arrived home at six thirty, after the body upstairs had been discovered." Kafka spoke to Inspector Abel but his explanation was clearly meant for all of us. "However, Frau Loos also said she was home when the police arrived. I believe you have in your notes that you arrived at the scene at six ten." The Inspector checked his report and acknowledged that fact. The woman said nothing.

"Frau Loos also said that some passing boys threw a rock through their window earlier in the week.

Now, observe: there still are fragments of glass on the outside ledge, which indicates that the window was broken from the inside. If it had been broken by a thrown rock, there would be no glass on the outside."

Frau Loos was silent.

The Inspector was confused. "What exactly are you trying to say, Herr Kafka?"

"I'm saying it is possible that, given these discrepancies in Frau Loos's statement, the official police report, although it accurately recorded the facts, may have missed the real cause of Herr Fredersohn's death."

"What do you mean?" asked Inspector Abel.

"It is possible that Frau Loos came home about five thirty, not six thirty as she said. As she entered the flat she smelled gas and

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saw her husband unconscious on the floor. She ran to the stove, shut off the gas valves, then ran to the window where she broke the glass to allow fresh air into the room."

"If that were the case, I should have opened the window," Frau Loos insisted.

"I think not," Kafka said, moving to the window. "The paint is not worn in the sash and the latch has been painted over, suggesting it hasn't been used in some time." Kafka then tried to open the latch and the window for the benefit of the Inspector. He was unable to do so.

"What does this have to do with Fredersohn's suicide?" Frau Loos asked indignantly.

"This building is old and drafty," Franz continued. "If you recall, Frau Fredersohn said her flat is very easy to heat because all the heat from the other floors rises to heat it. Just as heat rises, so does gas. The gas wafted up to the floor above, killing Fredersohn."

"But Fredersohn was found near the oven, after having obviously tampered with it," Inspector Abel objected.

"Herr Fredersohn was an engineering student as well as a handyman. Smelling gas, he went to the stove to see if there was something wrong. As he was inspecting the oven and the gas lines he succumbed to the gas."

Frau Loos looked at Kafka with rage and then at her husband, the look changing to one of revulsion.

Kafka went on, "Someone in this apartment left the gas valves on—the gas originated here." Kafka pointed to the Loos's oven, glancing at Herr Loos. "The gas filtered upstairs, killing first the jackdaw here, then Fredersohn above."

Herr Loos was weeping quietly as Franz finished speaking.

"This is ridiculous," Frau Loos said to the inspector angrily. "Who is this man that he can come in here and make these accusations!"

She began to speak again, but her husband spoke first. "That is enough!" he shouted. "Herr Kafka has described the events quite accurately. I am responsible for the death of Herr Fredersohn. It was entirely my fault."

Inspector Abel arrested Loos, and Kafka promised to mail a deposition on his return to Prague. Franz was in a peculiar hurry to leave the village. On the train I asked him about his haste.

"My work is finished," he said, "and I did not wish to see the widow, Frau Fredersohn." He sensed my confusion. "I do not take compliments or gratitude comfortably," he added. "People make too

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much of simple competence. I will, however, send her a letter of explanation along with the settlement of her lawsuit. It is my job," he said.

Later, on the train, I asked Kafka about Herr Loos. "Love is always accompanied by a measure of hate. Only the will of the love can divide the love from the hate."

"What a meaningless life," I said. "Herr Loos's."

"The trouble with life," Kafka said, "is that it is so seldom *really* lived. Man merely *exists*."

"Isn't that the same thing?" I asked.

He smiled, "No, my friend, it is not the same."

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

NEDRA TYRE

All Alice Willoughby wanted from one of her friends was a small favor, but friends, even the best of them, can be surprisingly disappointing . . .

THE SAME AS MURDER

by NEDRA TYRE

Alice Willoughby had thought of it as a simple favor that one friend could reasonably ask of another. She soon learned, however, that her friends considered it not a small favor but an invitation to be an accomplice to murder.

Now her happiness depended on Algernon. If he failed her she didn't know what she would do. She hadn't seen Algernon since she was 18 and he was 21. How long ago was that? Better not be too specific—not that she minded age, but she was weary of infirmity. At any rate, Algernon was on his way. She glanced at her watch and saw that it was only three—he would arrive at four.

This hour would give her a pleasant interim in which to review her futile attempts to secure the help of a friend.

For almost a year Alice had been hospitalized for a stroke and other illnesses, and then, remarkably, there had been a remission, and she had been able to go home. She had taken the hiatus as an opportunity to simplify her life. With a sense of pride she had looked at all the possessions she had accumulated. She realized now that she had been like a child clutching toys, and she had even been in competition with friends and acquaintances in acquiring antiques and objets d'art. That now seemed ridiculous to her and she must divest herself of all nonessentials.

So she had invited her friends to brunch—to her shame it had to

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be catered as she was no longer up to the duties of a real hostess—and she had asked them to select whatever they wanted of her belongings. The rest, except for a few pieces to furnish the small apartment to which she moved, were disposed of at auction. She was astonished at the prices they brought, and even more startled at the amount her house and property were sold for.

Alice hoped she would die soon. She must die soon. She intended to die soon. It was stupid to waste anything else on another extended hospital stay. Not that she begrudged the doctors and nurses their fees, but all that money should go for something life-enhancing and not to prolong Alice's failing existence.

It was foolish to fumble and falter and to be restricted to three rooms. Her friends were dear to telephone and visit her regularly. She was fond of them but she wasn't necessary to anyone. Surely the time had come to call a halt, and she intended to do so as soon as she was granted one small favor.

With a friend's help her death could have dignity and even a touch of charm. Late some afternoon she would welcome a friend. They would have tea, and then Alice would slowly sip a solution of sleeping pills or even swallow them one by one, and she and the friend would continue their pleasant talk until Alice edged into tranquility.

Naturally she could choose any old time and take the pills when she was alone, but that seemed such a desperate, lonely act—much too degrading for her taste. An affectionate, understanding onlooker was essential, Alice thought.

How often she would have been such a willing companion! During all those years of her volunteer hospital work with the bedridden, Alice had profoundly understood their longing for release. She had sat beside them and had talked as cheerfully and reassuringly as she could, and she had wished—and how much more they had wished—that their lives could end at that very moment.

There was nothing either cowardly or morbid about such a wish. Alice thought it was sensible and coolly logical.

It was such a small favor to ask. Alice made out a list of the friends she would approach, much in the way she might decide whom to invite to a party.

Nettie Brown was the first one Alice invited. Alice settled Nettie beside a decanter filled with bourbon and Nettie had helped herself and then believed that she'd have just one more teeny one, and then Alice had broached the subject of death. Nettie immediately col-

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lapsed in tears. "Oh, Alice, how can you bring up such a subject so soon after my poor papa died? I can't bear the mention of death." Papa had been dead for almost two years. It took several more drinks before Nettie could compose herself, and Alice quickly changed the topic from death to the excessively hot weather they were having.

The next on Alice's list was Joan Argyle, and Alice committed the most flagrant *faux pas* by suggesting that it wasn't at all unethical for someone to help another across the frontier of death. At the mention of such a theory Joan had broken out into copious sweat, and then Alice remembered that Joan's elderly Uncle Bim, recovering nicely—or so everyone thought—from a broken hip, had died right after a visit from Joan. Joan had insisted that Uncle Bim had been perfectly all right when she had left him, and there had been no one to dispute her. The doctor—everybody—agreed that Uncle Bim had somehow turned his head and had strangled himself, a victim of a kind of adult crib syndrome, and Joan had shared his considerable estate with Uncle Bim's other niece.

Joan's startled gaze shifted from Alice to the door and she had muttered something about an engagement she had forgotten. Alice hadn't heard from Joan since then and she missed her long, aimless, chirruping telephone calls.

Louise Chipps's plump diamond-ringed fingers had covered her mouth in horror at Alice's hypothetical generality that it was something one friend might reasonably expect of another to watch sympathetically as she died slowly sipping something lethal. "But, darling," Louise had protested, "watching somebody commit suicide when you could stop her is the same as murder. Nobody has that right. It's a sin. A mortal sin. Whoever did anything like that would burn in Hell forever."

Louise was much too sweet for such a fate to overtake her and Alice was compelled to cross her name off the rapidly diminishing list of friends who should be willing to help in a time of extreme need.

Lorna Norcross was dramatic in responding to Alice's plea. A professional actress of much talent, Lorna had given up her career to marry Tim Norcross and was prominent in all local theatrical productions, figuratively sweeping everybody else off the stage when she performed. A spotlight might have been on her as she sat beside Alice and gave a gesture that almost dislodged the tea service on the table beside her. Her voice reverberated. Her eyes closed. Her right hand went first to her throat and then to her forehead. "For

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a lover, yes, I could do what you suggest. For someone I was passionately attached to and couldn't watch suffer or waste away. Yes, oh, yes. But for a friend, no. Absolutely no."

She lifted her chin and became very still and then looked into the distance as if she were waiting for an audience to applaud.

The following afternoon Bea Revent was intent in answering Alice and she was perfectly frank. "Alice, we've always been able to speak honestly. I've told you things I've never told anyone else. I know you're to be trusted. You're the only person I can speak freely with. Strange, isn't it, that most people like to repeat and distort whatever anyone says? But you aren't like that at all. Yes, I could do it. You say this person will literally wither away and there's a simple, graceful way in which she could die quickly. Yes, if I were asked I could help her. And gladly."

Darling, obliging Bea. Alice felt at peace. Tomorrow would be perfect if Bea didn't have other plans.

"But, Alice, this is what I've learned about myself. Once I did that I would learn how simple it would be to commit a real murder and there are two people I'd like to murder—actually three. I truly long for them to die. So I just wouldn't dare do this for a friend. That would be all I needed to become a real murderer."

Alice quickly grasped that no decent person could with honor liberate a full-fledged murderer, so she didn't pursue the subject. Instead she and Bea gorged themselves on assorted (mostly rum-filled) petits fours and mint tea.

Every name on the list had been eliminated.

And so it had come down to Algernon Smith, of all people.

Alice hadn't seen Algernon in years. She hadn't even thought of him in years. Her husband had filled her life until he had died. It was just by chance that she saw Algernon's name on the financial page, a part of the paper that she regularly skipped—her investments were left to her broker, she didn't dare try to keep accounts. Not only was Algernon mentioned as being in town temporarily to handle a large property transfer, his hotel was named, and she had written him. Her faltering handwriting would have betrayed her disabilities (even the bank had telephoned two months previously about her greatly altered signature and she had had to sign new cards with her wobbly handwriting) but she could still type and she wrote him a warm, noncommittal invitation to visit her if he had time.

Algernon had been her first true love. She had thought she

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couldn't exist without him, yet it had been years since he had crossed her mind. For the life of her she couldn't remember what he looked like. Her family hadn't approved of the match, but they were wise in knowing that any objection would only increase Alice's attachment. She often overheard her aunts' conversation about Algernon (they wouldn't have dared say such things to her face). Now, as she waited for him to appear, she smiled in memory of what her aunts had called him. Cad. Not only cad but an unmitigated cad. Blackguard. Even then, such words were archaic.

They blamed most of Algernon's difficulty on his name. "No wonder he's turning out so badly," her Aunt Chloe had said. "He had to try to overcome that name." Aunt Jo was the one to top anybody's comment. "Knowing his mama the way I do, it's a wonder she didn't name him Hrothgar. Then he really would have had a name to live up to instead of just winding up as a woman chaser and fortune hunter." That was overstating the case. Algernon wasn't either of those just then though he had marked tendencies in both directions.

Alice hadn't minded his name at all. In fact, she thought it was sort of cute. There were enough Bobs and Eds and Jacks and Bills in the world.

Whatever his name, whatever his questionable behavior and inclinations, Alice had loved Algernon. Her heart was literally broken when he married Thelma White. There was no doubt that he loved Thelma. It was just his good luck that she was sole heiress of Charlie ("Croesus") White.

Algernon was gentle and sweet when he told Alice about Thelma. "Look, Alice, you're the kid sister I never had. I'm crazy about you, but you're going to grow up some day and I'll never be anything but adolescent."

For Alice the taste went out of food, she didn't care what she wore, she read books without comprehending a single sentence, but she had too much pride to let anyone know how she felt. Maybe it was something more than pride. Perhaps it was the budding ability to acquire composure and maturity. Whatever it was, she would at that moment have exchanged all the composure and maturity in the world to be with Algernon forever and ever.

The brass knocker sounded.

Algernon was outside.

Alice stumbled toward the door and managed to steady herself before she turned the knob.

Their greeting was warm but controlled, with none of that lips-

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barely-touching-cheeks or four-handed handshakes or hearty beating on the back.

They sat in opposite chairs and leaned toward each other and talked easily as if they had met every day of their lives. Thank heaven, Algernon didn't attempt any remember-whens. Alice disliked that game played by old friends after long absences as if they were trying to find some reason to affirm a friendship. He didn't say that we've a lot of catching up to do.

"I came back to dispose of some property," Algernon said. "For sentimental reasons I'd kept it. It used to be miles out of town. Now with all the development it's in the heart of things."

He hadn't lied to say how well she looked, and she felt she must explain her appearance. "I was quite ill, but I'm better."

"I've had good health and money all my adult life," Algernon said. "I don't know what I'd have done without either. I'm a great coward."

"Most of us are cowards, especially when it comes to bad health."

There were no embarrassing gaps in their conversation. There were silences but they were graceful. Neither of them was hiding anything from the other. And she didn't have to ask Algernon what she had asked her other friends. She knew he would give her the help she needed. He would be with her to the end and give her comfort. She felt very close to him as if he were a confidant. Of course he would do the small favor for her, and then she was upset to hear him say that his business was finished and he was flying back to Chicago early the next morning.

Permission couldn't be sought and there was no time for an explanation. This chance must not be snatched from her. She must act immediately.

"What would you like to drink, Algernon?"

"Let me do the drinks." He was trying to be tactful. He had realized how unsteady she was.

"No, I'll mix them. What do you like?"

"Anything alcoholic. Surprise me."

Alice went to the kitchen by way of the bathroom and her right hand didn't tremble as it clasped the large bottle on the bottom shelf of the medicine cabinet. At the kitchen sink the pills were easy to crumble and dissolve and she dropped the mixture into a tumbler. Then she prepared identical Scotch-and-sodas and set a red coaster beneath Algernon's drink. Her own drink was placed on a green coaster.

"Now you can help, please, Algernon. The red coaster is for you

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and the green one is mine. I made myself a ligh. one. I'm not supposed to drink."

At the door of the kitchen she asked Algernon if he'd like cheese or olives or cashews.

"Just cheese, thanks."

She turned back to the refrigerator. "I need your help again, Algernon, as soon as you've set the drinks down."

He came back for the cheese platter and they returned to the living room where they settled themselves back into the same chairs.

Alice glanced toward the drinks. The red one for Algernon and the green one for her—green to bring her peace in pleasant company. Her wish was at last being granted.

"You said for me to surprise you. I hope you like Scotch. That's not much of a surprise."

"It is down here. This is bourbon country."

He drank very slowly.

Alice wanted to gulp but she must savor every drop. She had heard of the elixir of life. How much better was this refreshing elixir of death. She hadn't realized how good Scotch was, but then it could be the pills which made it taste delicious. Not that this was a time for regrets, but she realized it was a pity she hadn't drunk more. She had missed much ease and relaxation by being rather a prude about drinking. Never, not ever, no matter how festive the occasion, had she allowed herself to take more than two.

Algernon took another deep drink and so did Alice. They finished their drinks at the same time. "Please fix seconds, Algernon."

"I don't think there'll be time for seconds."

His remark startled her. Then he set his glass down so hard that she thought it had broken.

"Look, Alice, I couldn't decide for the life of me why you invited me here this afternoon. I've been back home every year or so and there's never been any invitation from you. Frankly, I was just as glad there wasn't as my behavior was hardly above reproach—you know, throwing you over for Thelma. But I didn't realize you had borne me a grudge the rest of your life and were just waiting for revenge.

"At first this seemed like the most pleasant afternoon of my life—two people talking pleasantly together. There was kindness, acceptance. But then when you wouldn't let me mix the drinks I couldn't figure it out. Obviously you have lots of trouble in getting around and there's a terrible tremor in your hands. Then when you

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went into the kitchen it hit me. I've been in some tight places, and I'm alive this very minute because when things seem a little fishy and I get my back up I know how to take care of myself.

"I could watch you reflected in the pier glass. No Scotch and soda in the world requires any sort of powder. Then it was clear. This apparently nice friend hated my guts and was going to poison me. So I put the drink that was on the green coaster on the red coaster and whatever you so maliciously planned for me is going to happen to you. I'm not going to lift a hand to help you. I'm going to wipe my fingerprints off of everything I've touched in this place and then I'm saying good night and goodbye."

Then Algernon's speech became a mumble and his body plunged to the floor.

Poor foolish, benighted Algernon, not to be able to trust a friend. Well, he'd certainly cooked his own goose and she was furious with him for ruining her plans.

There wasn't a soul to depend upon except herself. She had no idea of telephoning the police. It was far too late in her own day to be taken to prison for murder because Algernon had behaved stupidly. Algernon had proved himself a thief and a glutton in snatching her lovely peaceful death away from her and in gulping it down for himself.

At least she now knew how many pills it took. The number had perplexed her, but Algernon was a very large man and she was a very small woman—so there were plenty of pills left.

Perhaps it would only be decent to leave a note of explanation, but if she told the truth it would only make Algernon out a great fool and great fools would rather die than to be proved what great fools they were.

Algernon must be left where he was, however awkwardly positioned he might be. Alive, Algernon had carried his excess weight well, but now he looked—how could she be so unkind?—precisely like a beached walrus.

She would close the door on Algernon and make herself snug in her bedroom. She would take a nice long soothing bath and put on her favorite nightgown and mix her drink (heavy on the pills, generous with the Scotch) and sip it while she looked out across the lighted city and thought how surprising—or did she mean amazing?—her life had been, especially its last few hours.

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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY NEWSLETTER

CRIME BEAT

by R. E. PORTER

As I take over these pages from the able hands of Otto Penzler, it seems fitting to call attention to something Otto didn't mention while writing his column. For more than a year now he has been the proprietor of The Mysterious Bookshop at 129 West 56th Street in New York. Specializing in new, used, and rare mysteries, it's a great place to visit next time you're in New York.

My fellow newsletter columnists haven't been idle either. Chris Steinbrunner recently wrote new introductions for the first six Philo Vance mysteries by S. S. Van Dine, reissued in hard covers by Gregg Press. And Jon L. Breen is working on an annotated bibliography of books and pamphlets about the mystery field. Tentatively titled *What About Murder?,* it's scheduled for publication next year by Scarecrow Press.

AWARDS TIME: This year's Edgar Awards from the Mystery Writers of America had competition from The American Book Awards, which also presented prizes for the best hardcover and paperback mysteries published last year. Arthur Maling's *The Rheingold Route* (Harper & Row) won the Edgar for best novel, but The American Book Award went to John D. MacDonald for *The Green Ripper* (Lippincott). The paperback Edgar winner was William L. DeAndrea's *The Hog Murders* (Avon), while TABA's choice was *Stained Glass* by William F. Buckley, Jr. (Warner). (The American Book Awards category included paperback reprints as well as originals.)

Other Edgar winners: Best first novel was Richard North Patterson's *The Lasko Tangent* (Norton), best short-story winner was Geoffrey Norman's "Armed and Dangerous" (*Esquire*), and best biographical-critical book was Ralph E. Hone's *Dorothy L. Sayers: A Literary Biography* (Kent State University Press). A special Edgar went to Allen J. Hubin for *The Bibliography of Crime Fiction, 1749–1975* (Publisher's Inc.).

And speaking of awards, the Crime Writers Association of England awarded its Gold Dagger to Dick Francis for *Whip Hand,* recently published in this country by Harper & Row—a Joan Kahn Book.

BOOK CLUBS: The major mainstream book clubs are offering an unusual number of suspense novels as main selections this summer. The

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Book-of-the-Month Club chose *Innocent Blood* by P. D. James (Scribners) as its June selection, and followed this with a dual selection including Graham Greene's *Dr. Fischer of Geneva* (Simon & Schuster). The Literary Guild's summer dual selection included Mary Higgins Clark's *The Cradle Will Fall* (Simon & Schuster) and *Solo* by Jack Higgins (Stein & Day).

P. D. James toured several American cities in May to promote *Innocent Blood,* following a week spent on a Mystery Writers' Cruise organized by Dilys Winn. British newspapers report that Tatum O'Neal and Faye Dunaway will star in the movie version of the bestseller, to be filmed by 20th Century-Fox.

CLASSIC DETECTION: Paperback publishers on both sides of the Atlantic are launching reprint series aimed at fans of classic detection. In September, Dell will begin a series chosen by Carol Brener, owner of New York City's Murder Ink bookstore, and Ruth Windfeldt, owner of the Scene of the Crime Book Shop in Sherman Oaks, California. The first four books are recent titles by Sheila Radley, Pauline Glen Winslow, Mignon Warner, and Robert Barnard, with some reprints of classic mysteries to follow.

In England Hamlyn Paperbacks has launched its Whodunnit series with novels by Nicholas Blake, Jonathan Gash, Michael Innes, and Ellery Queen (*The Siamese Twin Mystery).*

COMING ATTRACTIONS: Douglas G. Greene, professor of history at Old Dominion University, has uncovered still more unknown short stories by John Dickson Carr, from a Haverford College literary magazine Carr edited. Four of them are impossible-crime mysteries solved by Carr's French sleuth, Bencolin. The newly discovered stories, along with six Carr radio plays, two Sherlockian playlets, and two essays, will be published August 27 by Harper & Row under the title *The Door to Doom and Other Detections.* (The title story was reprinted in *EQMM* last October.) Another Joan Kahn Book.

Joyce Harrington, whose *EQMM* story, "The Purple Shroud," won the Edgar for best mystery short story published in 1972, has written her first novel, *No One Knows My Name,* about a psychopathic killer among the cast of a summer stock company. St. Martin's Press will publish it in September.

Brian Garfield's Edgar-winning novel *Hopscotch* has been filmed with Walter Matthau and Glenda Jackson in the leading roles. It opens across the country on September 26.

Bill Pronzini, who has collaborated with several mystery and science-fiction writers in the past, has just completed a collaboration with famed Washington columnist Jack Anderson. Their 150,000-word novel, *The Cambodia File,* deals with the intrigues accompanying the fall of Cambodia in 1975 and 1976. Doubleday will publish it in January.

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BLOODY VISIONS

by CHRIS STEINBRUNNER

Peter Lovesey nearly always has a twinkle in his eye when discussing his Victorian creation, Scotland Yard's Sergeant Cribb. "You think of two detectives rushing to the scene of the crime and the furthest image from your mind is Cribb and his assistant, Thackeray, jumping on ancient bicycles and pedaling off through the countryside." Lovesey's attitudes towards Cribb are loving and amusing—although the Sergeant himself is quite a serious fellow. Wryly serious about his working-class background, which he feels rightly) will impede his rise in rank at the Yard. Deadly serious about his investigative work, drawing on "wits and persistence." Lovesey had read enough memoirs of Victorian policemen to know their solving crimes was "more a question of sniffing out the criminal by knowledge of human nature than of footprints in the snow or fingerprints on the windowsill." Happily, three of Cribb's adventures have crossed the Atlantic to appear on American television on the PBS *Mystery!* series, and we can watch as the bowler-hatted detective casts a sharp eye on malevolent doings at such diverse settings as a six-day walk marathon, a Thames paddle journey, and a raucous music hall.

Actually, nearly a dozen Cribb tales have been scheduled for British television hours—and one of them, *Waxworks* (shot in part at Madame Tussaud's), is feature-length. Lovesey told EQMN recently that he is very content with the way the first shows have come out and that actor Alan Dobie is to his mind the "definitive" Sergeant, determined, ambitious, yet fully resigned to remain at that rank for the rest of his career, as each time he solves a case his socially ambitious Chief Inspector (in the newly formed Criminal Investigation Division) takes the credit. And the cases, all based on the social history of the era, are fascinating.

Abracadaver takes place in an English music hall, and for this an actual ancient theater was used, filled with a ragtag Victorian audience singing lustily along with the artistes. Someone, however, has been involving the performers in a series of dangerous practical jokes—one of which turns fatal. Among the things Cribb learns is that risque midnight performances were often staged at the halls for members of the social elite—perhaps including a few of his superiors at the Yard!

In *Wobble to Death*, murder strikes at a six-day marathon walking race, a "Wobble" to elect the Pedestrian Champion of the World, held inside a huge, grimy Industrial Hall.

The most idyllic of the trio of shows is *Swing, Swing Together*, filmed on the Thames River against sites which seem not to have changed since the turn of the century. A college girl, while enjoying a daring nude nocturnal bathe in the river, sees a mysterious boat with three passengers. Later the murdered body

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of a tramp is dredged up. Cribb feels that the girl has seen something important and that there will be another crime to come, so he, Thackeray, the girl, and a young policeman begin a lovely puntboat journey down the Thames, past Oxford (where there is another murder), through the many locks, more or less retracing —coincidentally—the journey in the popular romantic novel of the day, *Three Men in a Boat,* which is on everyone's lips. But it is not all riverside sunshine: a dark, sinister workhouse and even Jack the Ripper figure into an absorbing case given—as have all the programs—stunning attention to period detail.

From the very start of each show—a sprightly collage of Police Gazette illustrations—Cribb is a winner. One hopes some of the other filmed programs, like *Waxworks* and *A Case of Spirits,* will be imported next season. Among the adventures Lovesey is writing now are how P. T. Barnum came to London to buy an elephant, and one about a dangerous royal nannie. A welcome alternative to that television mystery staple, the wild car chase!

Nancy Drew has just celebrated her fiftieth birthday—which should make the Hardy Boys, who started their investigations earlier, about fifty-two and fifty-four respectively—and we should not let the occasion pass without a few words about the film adventures of the most famous heroine in mystery fiction. Bonita Granville played the girl with just the proper spunk, Frankie Thomas as the attentive, long-suffering, athletic Ned Nickerson (called Ted in the films) was just right too—and his association with the genre (he also starred in *Tim Tyler's Luck)* apparently rubbed off, for the actor now is a mystery novelist (*Sherlock Holmes and the Golden Bird).*

Together they sparked four delightful films. We met the pair first in *Nancy Drew, Detective* (1939), in which—in Nancy's roadster—they cleverly followed a carrier pigeon who led them to where an elderly philanthropic woman had been imprisoned. In *Nancy Drew, Reporter* (1940, the year all the rest were made), Nancy began an internship at a local newspaper, and uttered her classic credo: a parent need not be *exactly* obeyed if there's sleuthing to be done. By the last film of the series, however, *Nancy Drew and the Hidden Staircase,* she had become insufferable, manufacturing evidence to make a murder appear a suicide and endangering the lives of three people, including Ned, in the process.

But the third film, *Nancy Drew, Trouble Shooter,* is easily the tops; in it she did her best detective work. The body of a man missing a month was discovered buried in a cabbage field, an unusual flower just blooming on the very spot. Nancy suspected that the flower seed had dropped from the murderer's pants cuff, and her investigation began, Ned tagging dutifully along. A good show from that long-vanished time when Hollywood still made family mysteries.

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

Although I have a special interest
ı sports mysteries, I seldom find
ne that really satisfies me. Most
ften, the problem is the author's
nited knowledge of the game in
uestion, which can lead to errors
ke A. Conan Doyle's in "Silver
laze," unnoticeable to the casual
ader but gross to the knowledg-
ole fan. In other cases, such as
ome of Kin Platt's Max Roper nov-
s, there is disappointingly little
orts content, with the game serv-
g as a mere backdrop. At the op-
osite extreme are stories in which
e sports background is so heavily
nphasized as to completely lose
e non-fan.

This month offers an unusual bon-
nza of four new novels combining
ime with sports, one by an old
and and three by newcomers. In
ach case, the author's sports
nowledge is more than adequate,
deed unimpeachable in a couple
cases, and in each book sport is
solutely central to the plot. But
ly two of the books can be counted
unqualified successes.

* Dick Francis: *Whip Hand,* Harper
Row, $9.95. All of ex-jockey Fran-
's novels are unified by an in-
lvement with thoroughbred racing,
t his eighteenth marks his first use
a series character. Sid Halley, in-
ed-jockey-turned-private-investi-
tor, was introduced in *Odds Against*
965), and his encore coincides
ot coincidentally) with his appear-
ce as hero of a fine British TV se-
s recently sampled on PBS. In
another departure, Francis uses the
tricky modular approach, giving Hal-
ley and his martial-arts-teaching as-
sociate Chico Barnes three
apparently unconnected cases to
work on at once. Otherwise, this is
typical Francis, with the racing back-
ground, the characters and their re-
lationships, and the scenes of action
and menace all expertly done. As a
sporting bonus, Francis offers a fas-
cinating balloon-racing segment.

*** Shannon OCork: *Sports Freak,*
St. Martin's, $8.95. During a game
between two fancifully named Na-
tional Football League teams, the
High Mountain Climbers and the
Coastville Johnny Rebs, a quarter-
back is murdered via a method that
would have delighted Cortland Fitz-
simmons. Here is a refreshingly
straightforward and unpretentious
whodunit, peopled with a colorful
cast of suspects and well told by fe-
male photographer-narrator T. T.
Baldwin. The book even includes
that venerable staple of the sports
mystery, the poisoned hotdog (along
with, less delightfully, the first ref-
erence I have ever seen in print to
"Aggie" Christie).

** Dave Klein: *Blind Side,* Charter,
$2.50. Again NFL football is the
background, as reporter Butch Lewis,
covering the fictitious New York
Panthers, begins to suspect a player
is committing murders in the cities
the team visits. Klein, himself a
sportswriter, gives the tale a feel of
authenticity, but the book suffers
from the overstuffed blockbuster

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syndrome, with much extraneous matter detracting from the intriguing plot. The real problem is that Klein stakes much on the whodunit angle but spends too little space on letting the reader get to know the possible suspects.

** Gary Morgenstein: *Take Me Out to the Ballgame,* St. Martin's, $10.95. The story of Cal Fleisher, overly zealous fan of the Buffalo Matadors baseball club, is not a mystery but rather a cautionary tale about the dangers of increasing sports violence. The final horror is all too predictable, and even allowing for exaggeration, the author's view of American sports leagues and crowds is distorted to the point of unbelievability. Still, the novel is diverting enough, though non-baseball fans won't know what to make of it.

*** John Ball: *Then Came Violence,* Doubleday-Crime Club, $8.95. Early in his latest case, Pasadena cop Virgil Tibbs makes a string of Sherlock Holmes-style deductions from examining the body of an unidentified murder victim. Few contemporary detectives still do this kind of thing, and it's a refreshing touch. This time, though, the mystery plot carries less interest than the dignified, decorous, painfully noble romance Ball allows his sleuth with a woman he is assigned to protect.

*** Celia Dale: *The Deception,* Harper & Row, $8.95. Readers of Jacqueline Wilson, Celia Fremlin, and other chroniclers of British domestic crime will enjoy this engrossing and deftly written case history of murder in an English suburb. Advertising man Leonard Henderson returns home to find his wife dead. In the course of the investigation, their earlier life is explored via a *Study in Scarlet*-type flashback. The solution, though not surprising and perhaps not intended to be, is admirably worked out.

*** E. X. Ferrars: *Designs on Life,* Doubleday-Crime Club, $8.95. The first collection of short stories by another specialist in domestic homicide offers nine well crafted tales, one new and three more new to American readers. Though they may lack the resonance of Ellin or Rendell, these stories exhibit the same quiet competence and technical ingenuity that mark the author's novels.

*** Pierre Audemars: *Slay Me a Sinner,* Walker, $9.95. In his first U.S. appearance in several years, M. Pinaud investigates the rural shooting of a much-hated colonel, whose death the locals are determined to see as an accident. Offering a full measure of Gallic charm, gastronomy, and eroticism, with a dash of British cosiness, this proves a mystery with a moral emphasis and not a detective story in the fair-play sense.

The hardcover reprinting of Edmund Crispin's Gervase Fen novels continues with *Swan Song* (Walker, $10.95), originally published in this country as *Dead and Dumb* (1947), combining formalist sleuthing with a satire of the opera world. Available in a new paperback edition is my personal favorite among Fen's cases, 1949's *Buried for Pleasure* (Harper-Perennial, $1.95), describing the don-detective's hilarious campaign for a seat in Parliament.

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a *NEW* detective story by

HENRY T. PARRY

This story has a fascinating premise: suppose you picked up today's newspaper, turned to the obituary page, and found your name—an unusual name—listed among the deceased. Well, lawyer Griffith Adams, facing this shocker, became a detective to solve the mystery. After all, like Mark Twain, he knew the report of his death had been greatly exaggerated . . .

THE LUCKIEST MAN IN THE WORLD

by HENRY T. PARRY

The fire was drawing nicely and I was about to close the curtains but decided to leave them open so I could see the winter sunset slanting through our woods. I sat down and was paging through the local newspaper, thinking idly about getting myself a drink, but what was really going through my mind was the thought of how fortunate I was.

Here I was at 52, healthy, with a lovely wife whom I loved dearly, the two girls out of college, the prospect of being able to earn all the money I would ever need—two days ago the appellate court had sustained a decision in favor of my biggest client—here I was, the luckiest man in the world. Going through the paper, I noticed the first name in the obituary column: *Adams, Griffith. Survived by wife, Barbara Rowland Adams, and daughters, Jennifer and Louise. Interment private.*

I am Griffith Adams.

My first reaction was bewildered shock, to be replaced by a growing resentment at the bad taste of the joke. I could hear the witty

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remarks of my colleagues in the firm and my friends around town. It did not occur to me that it may not have been a joke. I dialed Eddie Henley, the editor of the *Bulletin,* and suggested the paper may have made a mistake.

"How could I be sure, Griff, until you called me to deny it?" I would have to bear with a lot of comments like that. "I'm glad it's not official. But, seriously, I've been planning to call you."

"What happened?"

"Something fell through the crack. The notice came in the mail, just a typed sheet in a personal envelope, the kind with the return address printed on it. It got set up in type without being checked."

"What was the return address?"

"I've got the envelope right here. 24 Oak Road, right here in North Hills. Postmarked in North Hills too."

I hung up, forgetting to thank him. 24 Oak Road is my house, the place where I was standing at this moment, alive, and until a few moments ago, well.

I heard the garage doors go up, indicating that Barbara was putting her car away. She came into the living room, slender, erect, with gray streaks in her hair, and dressed, as she described it, with "the simplicity you pay more for." As she walked across the room, she looked more beautiful to me than when I had first seen her all those years ago in History 70. She stood with one hand on the mantel, partly turned away from me, looking as though she had just come in from some pleasant experience which she was still trying to enjoy.

"I saw Curt Lang up at Wagon Train today," she said.

My satisfaction with my lot was now completely demolished. In a few minutes I had seen my name in the obituary column and been told by my wife that her boy friend from college days had reappeared.

I hated Curt Lang in those days, when the three of us were in college together, because of the many times I had seen him with Barbara, always with Barbara, driving around in a sporty little car. Though I knew her only slightly, from the history class, it did not prevent me from being thoroughly entranced by her, a distant and inarticulate admiration. But whatever their relationship—and to this day Barbara has never discussed it—it was less than eternal, for after graduation Curt went to Zurich for graduate work and married the daughter of the owner of a dozen Swiss hotels.

I met Barbara by accident six years later. I had been out of law school for two years and was working for Justice in Washington.

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One noon I was waiting for the elevator in the Treasury building, and when the elevator door opened, Barbara stepped out, more attractive than ever.

"Griff! Griff Adams! Don't you remember me? Barbara Howland."

Did I remember her! We chatted for several minutes and somehow found ourselves having lunch together. She was working in the Treasury Department, making economic studies of excise taxes or something like that.

The months that followed were the happiest I had ever known. We went to the galleries and the concerts and hiked along the canal. After a year we were married and came up here where I started with Anderson and Fitzsimmons, which is now Fitzsimmons and Adams.

Hearing that Curt Lang was back should not have disturbed me, but it did. Perhaps if I were honest I would admit to a subconscious fear that Barbara still entertained romantic ideas about this man from her youth, who even now may have retained his attraction for her, particularly when compared to my pedestrian self.

"What's he doing in this country?" I asked. "I thought he was in Europe."

"He's managing that new motel at Wagon Train. Snow Lodge. It's owned by the chain he works for."

Wagon Train Mountain was a new winter sports area about 20 miles up the valley from North Hills. Our town was dead nine months of the year, but after the first heavy snow everything picked up, even the practice of law. Barbara and some of her friends were planning to open a thrift shop at Wagon Train during the coming season, the profits to go to the local hospital.

"He's divorced. For about a year now. His contract with the chain is up in a month or so."

"Then what?" Back to the Alps, I hoped.

"He says he would like to find something around Wagon Train."

"I'm sure he would," I said, and added, "Would you like a drink?"

I suppose my question was designed to change the subject because Barbara never drinks anything but an occasional sherry or sometimes wine with dinner. I generally had a modest pre-dinner ration of bourbon which I kept in a special bottle that Barbara had bought because she objected to keeping a whiskey bottle in plain sight on the liquor tray. It was a salad-dressing bottle that had the inside partitioned vertically, one side for oil, the other for vinegar, with a separate spout on each side. I went to the liquor tray and found

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my two-sided bottle empty. I started for the basement for a refill from the new case I had just bought.

"If you're going down, would you take this with you?" Barbara asked, handing me a can of insecticide. "Put it on the lower shelf with my other sprays." Barbara had a large collection of house plants which she administered to in the basement in the winter, constantly potting, re-potting, dusting, and spraying.

I tore open the new carton of bourbon, twisted the cap off a bottle, and filled both sides of my double bottle. Back upstairs, I fixed myself a larger drink than usual, thinking that this was the drink I had been planning to have while I sat before the fire congratulating myself on my good fortune. Instead I drank as I paced about the room, puzzled as to how my name got into the obituary column and concerned over the reappearance of Curt Lang. I had not told Barbara about the obituary, partly because I did not want to greet her with disquieting news when she came in, partly because I wanted to wait until I had some idea as to the reason.

I had finished my second drink when Barbara called to say dinner was ready. Our conversation during dinner was sporadic, Barbara's thoughts were elsewhere, mine, as was my habit, on my work. Our main course was a leftover curry.

"This tastes different," I said. "Not like the other night."

"I added more curry powder. It was too bland. Maybe I put in too much."

After dinner Barbara went to the basement to putter with her plants and I went into my study to buckle down to my nightly quota of work.

That night I had my first violent intestinal attack.

"Food poisoning, Griff, that's what it is," Dr. Hammond said. "You'll be all right in a few days. What you been eating?"

I told him what I had eaten—breakfast at home, coffee and pastry in the office, lunch, consisting of chicken salad, with Fitz at Henny's Tavern, and drinks and dinner at home. I pointed out that no one else had got sick.

"You just may have been more hospitable to the bacteria," he said. "Anyway, I've always wondered about the refrigeration at Henny's."

I was shaken by the violence of the attack and stayed home for nearly a week, stalking about the house and brooding over the obituary incident. Barbara was inclined to dismiss the obituary notice as a practical joke. She said she had bought our personal en-

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velopes from Miss Abby Gottshalk's stationery store and reminded me that I had taken a supply of them to the office. Although I knew it would be fruitless, I decided to drive into town to check Miss Abby's store.

Barbara had gone to Wagon Train, taking my car because hers had refused to start. I crossed my fingers, turned on the ignition in her car, and, perversely, the engine started. I was fumbling about for the seat belt when I felt an envelope protruding from the crevice between the bottom of the seat and the seat's back. I opened the envelope—it was unsealed—and slid out a photograph, a close-up of a man with blond hair to his ears, with ski goggles around his neck. He was, I guessed, about my age and looked like a ski instructor dressed up in clothes that were too youthful.

Across the scarlet sweater were the words: *To Barbara, with love, and memories of love, Curt.* I replaced the picture in the envelope and put it back where I had found it. The gray day had become grayer.

Miss Abby Gottshalk greeted me when I entered her store. When I told her what I wanted she pursed her lips and said, "No, I don't think so. Let me check." She disappeared in the back.

"No," she said when she returned. "Nobody ordered envelopes with your address on them. Just Mrs. Adams that one time. But there's lots of stores sell them. Seems to me you could order any address you wanted printed on them. You might ask at that new shop that's opened up at Wagon Train. In the lobby of Snow Lodge. Or have Mrs. Adams ask. I hear she spends a lot of her time up there now."

With that she gave me a meaningful look, as if she could reveal more were she not restrained by high moral scruples. But my mental state may have been such that I gave her remarks a meaning not intended.

As long as I was in town, I decided to stop at the office and check in with Fitz. As I went into his office, Carol Metternick, one of our legal secretaries, was there, laughing at something Fitz was saying. She inquired after my health and left us.

"That girl never ceases to amaze me. Look at this." Fitz pointed to a stack of envelopes on his desk, ready for mailing. "This, you will be stunned to hear, is the semi-annual billing for Fitzsimmons and Adams, going out now, not two months late the way it used to be. Carol just kept after it."

He told me how much we could expect to receive, and I was sur-

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prised at the amount, fully twenty percent more than our June billing. Neither of us mentioned it, but the increase was due entirely to business I had brought in.

"Howard Nayler was in to see me this morning," Fitz went on. "The same old subject. When will we make him a partner."

"I still don't agree with you on that, Fitz."

"Better watch your step, Griff. That mother of his just might march into your office and demand justice for her Howard. On a day when I'm not here, I hope."

There are two partners in our firm, Seth Fitzsimmons and myself, and six associates, lawyers who are not partners. Normally Howard Nayler would have been made a partner some time ago but I opposed it because there was an obsequiousness in his manner that ran counter to my grain. I knew that if anything happened to me, Fitz would take Howard as a partner ahead of any of the other five associates, even though, in my opinion, Jim Owens, one of the other associates, would be far more suitable. Fitz thought Howard was a highly competent lawyer, likely to bring in increasing numbers of new clients, and so did I. But—

Fitz's joking reference to Howard's mother had a foundation of truth. Around town Mrs. Nayler was regarded as a bit of a dragon lady. The reason Howard remained unmarried, people said, was because Mrs. Nayler scared off any girl in whom Howard showed an interest. She ran, with an ungloved hand, a big nursery and flower shop, enterprises to which Howard, as an only child and dutiful son, devoted what time he could spare, even foregoing, when necessary, his sole pastime of weekends on the ski slopes at Wagon Train.

"Seems to me you ought to relent, Griff, if only because Howard introduced us to Carol Metternick."

He was referring to the day when Howard came into my office accompanied by a young woman whose vitality and wholesomeness made Howard look as if he were stuffed with the bindings of old volumes of the *Corpus Juris Civilis*.

"Mr. Adams, this is Carol Metternick, formerly with Henderson, Swinton, Peabody, in New York. She is looking for a job."

Carol Metternick was one of those healthy, blue-eyed types who look as though they should be wearing braids about their heads and carrying skis on their shoulders. I hired her at the close of that interview because one of our secretaries was retiring and because of the glowing letter of recommendation from Henderson, Swinton,

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Peabody. She was recently widowed, her husband having died suddenly, and she found the city too lonely and full of memories. Not that she made any attempt to enlist sympathy. She simply stated the fact. She moved up to North Hills, found a small apartment, and began work with us. After three months none of us could imagine how we had ever got along without her.

When I asked Howard how he had got to know this paragon, he shrugged—a characteristic gesture of his before speaking, as if he were already disclaiming what he was about to say—and spoke vaguely of a law-school classmate who knew someone at Henderson, Swinton, Peabody, and who had been asked if he could place a crackerjack legal secretary.

Aside from her intelligence and unobtrusive efficiency, the biggest impression Carol made on our office life was the coffee she served Fitz and me every morning. Carol's coffee was the best we had ever tasted, strong and bitter, so that it complemented the rich, sweet cookies which she made herself. Fitz used to say that we may be on our way to the poorhouse but we'd be fat when we arrived.

"No news of my briefcase, I suppose." Fitz had borrowed my briefcase and it had been stolen from his car.

"Whoever took it," Fitz said, "I'd like to see his face when he found that all that was in it was the Stewart Company contract. But maybe somebody will find it and turn it in. It had your name on it, you said.

"Don't forget," he went on, "we're expecting you tonight. My customary superb cooking. There'll just be the four of us."

Among his other conceits, Fitz fancied himself as a gourmet cook although Virginia Fitzsimmons asked how you could give yourself gourmet-cook airs when you only prepared a dozen meals a year.

As I left the office I thought how smoothly the place seemed to be running in my absence. I had always considered myself the motive force in the firm, which was certainly true for the last seven or eight years. Now it was apparent that if I were to disappear from the scene everything would continue smoothly without me. With, no doubt, Howard Nayler sitting in my office as the new partner.

Fitz greeted us at his door, genial, silver-haired, and silver-tongued, with a long craggy face, his blue eyes pale and frosty, a granitic gleam in them that wasn't apparent until you looked closely. His ancestors went back to the time of Ethan Allen and Fort Ticonderoga, and as I pointed out to him, to the time of Benedict

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Arnold too. Barbara went off with Virginia and I followed Fitz into the little place he had for making drinks.

"Before we go inside," Fitz said, busying himself with drinks, "let me ask: did you tell anyone about our arrangement? Barbara or anyone?"

Fitz was referring to money he owed me. He had got mixed up in a real-estate deal which had fallen through and Fitz and a number of others had lost their investment, money Fitz didn't have to lose because he had to borrow from me to repay his loans. I felt under obligation to help him because he had got me started in private practice and had made me a partner. He was also my adviser and confidant, the guardian of our girls when they were minors, and the executor of my will. Barbara knew that if anything were to happen to me she could turn to Fitz for advice and help. I had no written evidence of the loan nor did I think I needed one. The time would be up in just a few weeks. Fitz's reference to it now was the only time he had ever mentioned his debt. It was a fair amount too—$100,000—which I could not afford to lose. Neither could Fitz.

He placed the drinks on the tray and we went into the living room. "Barbara, this is yours," he said, offering her a crystal glass of pale-gold sherry. "I admire your strength of character in avoiding anything stronger."

"I understand you've become the leading whiskey distributor in these parts," Barbara said.

"Only a measure of thrift, my dear," Fitz said, "on which we pride ourselves." Virginia snorted. "When you can buy," Fitz explained, "any number of cases of Old Browbeat bourbon—the brand name is my own invention—I feel I must include my friends in the saving. Your canny husband has taken advantage of it to the extent of one case."

Fitz and Virginia had been on a cruise a month before and had met a wholesale liquor dealer who, in a burst of largess, had offered to supply Fitz with liquor at only a slight mark-up. Fitz had canvassed the office staff and his friends and had bought thirty cases of Scotch and bourbon, drafting Jim Owens at the office to distribute it. I remembered that we had come home one Sunday afternoon to find a case of Old Browbeat, as Fitz termed it, sitting inconveniently in the middle of the garage floor. The bourbon I had been drinking at home, and the bourbon I was holding in my hand at this moment, had come from the same windfall purchase. For a person who was casual in managing his personal finances, Fitz had gone to a great

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deal of trouble to save a few dollars. But economies are in the eye of the economizer.

It may have been the soothing influence of good food eaten with friends and the resultant desire not to shatter the euphoria I felt that made me refrain from telling Barbara on the way home about finding Curt Lang's picture in her car. It occurred to me that, in shunning conflict, I was behaving like Howard Nayler. But what proof did I have that there was anything to warrant conflict?

The next morning I thought I had better get back to work again. As I went into my office, Carol Metternick intercepted me.

"There's a Mr. Stratos outside to see you. He's got a teenager with him."

Stratos was an immigrant who was farming the old Perkins place, dairy farming. I had helped him a few months ago when the police had picked up his sixteen-year-old son on a stolen-car charge. The boy was clearly guilty but I was able to persuade the people involved not to make a record of it. When Stratos and Andy walked into my office, I figured Andy was in trouble again.

"Mr. Adams, I am ashamed to come here with this no-good criminal. I am ashamed because you were a friend to us, and now how have we paid you back?"

I can't reproduce how he talked, but he was so earnest and so clearly crushed by the imputation of ingratitude that to me he seemed eloquent. He paused, and I wondered if he was going to break into tears. Instead he fumbled in the shopping bag on the floor beside him and brought out my briefcase, the one that had been stolen from Fitz's car.

"He says he found it in a trash can at the shopping center. I say he stole it. If he found it, why didn't he bring it back to you? It has your name on it. Why did he hide it in the dairy barn?"

I opened the briefcase and saw that the Stewart Company contract was still in it.

"Now, you, you apologize to Mr. Adams and then beat it out of here for school. And come straight home afterward. No hanging around. You don't, I kill you." Andy raised his eyebrows, muttered something like an apology, and slouched out. I thought I caught the words "big deal" as he went out the door.

"My Andy, I don't know, I don't think he is, down under, a bad kid. He says he did not steal your briefcase. But ever since that bad thing happen with that car, I cannot be sure he isn't lying. He did one good thing, Mr. Adams."

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"What was that?" Andy did not strike me as a do-gooder.

"He said there were letters in your briefcase and he dropped them in the mail. He said he heard if you did anything to the U.S. mail, they would hunt you down even if it took a hundred years. So maybe—"

Big deal, I thought, to use Andy's expression.

We commiserated on the difficulties of raising children in a time of declining standards and then he began telling me how things were going at the farm. Pretty well, it seemed, in spite of endless work with never a day off.

"But I don't care about that, Mr. Adams. It's mine. I got a chance. I work, I know I get somewhere. But some days when I'm out with the tractor, I look at the land and do I think how lucky I am? No. I think what good is all this if your son is a crook?"

I was struck by the parallel with my own situation. What good was my success in the practice of law, my position in the community, my comfortable and rewarding way of life, if I was about to lose the one person who made it all meaningful?

In spite of a cold that diminished my senses of taste and smell, I felt that my attendance was required at the office Christmas lunch. We held it in a private room at the Indian Head Inn, and everybody in the office came, bringing wives, husbands, boy friends, and girl friends. A table full of bottles had been set up and by the time I arrived—the driving was not good because of the snow—everyone had applied himself quite earnestly. Fitz himself had a rosier glow than usual.

I was standing at the table looking for something non-alcoholic when Howard Nayler came over and poured himself some bourbon. He had already had a couple, judging by the flush on his otherwise pale face.

"May I fix you something, Mr. Adams?" he asked.

"I was looking for ginger ale."

"I don't see any," he said, poking about among the bottles. "Just a minute, I'll go around to the regular bar."

I chatted with some of the wives for ten minutes or so and then returned to the table to find a substitute for ginger ale. At that point Howard appeared and held out a bubbling glass.

"Sorry it took me so long. I had to wait my turn in the bar."

I assumed that to get to the regular bar of the inn he had to go outside because his shoes were wet, as if snow had melted on them.

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"Good party, isn't it? And it has been a good year," he said. "But maybe next year will be my year. Here's hoping."

I knew what he meant. Maybe next year I would finally agree that he should be made a partner. I was irritated, mostly, I suppose, by his timing. I don't care what people do at office parties, short of violating the criminal statutes, but I am annoyed by those who use the occasion for heavy-handed apple polishing. Howard was making plenty of money, he had just received a substantial year-end bonus, and his mother certainly made no financial demands on him as that formidable lady's nursery and flower shop were obviously prospering. I passed off his comment with some meaningless remark, being more determined than ever that Howard Nayler would never be a partner as long as I lived.

The lunch was jolly, full of in-house quips that are uproarious to the cognoscenti. Just before dessert, Fitz stood up and banged with a spoon on his highball glass.

"Quiet! Quiet!" Howard Nayler yelled.

"Defer! Defer!" Jim Owens sang.

Fitz made the usual comments appropriate for the season and went on, "This year we take pleasure in welcoming a new member to our staff. I refer, of course, to Carol Metternick. Carol has asked that as a mark of her gratitude to being associated with this brilliant and talented group, and in order to show off a bit—What was I about to say? Oh yes, Carol has asked that she be allowed to provide the dessert today. So, Carol, do your worst. The firm denies all responsibility."

Carol uncovered a large tray of elaborate pastry and went around the table, placing on each plate something resembling a puffed-up eclair. When she came to me, she carefully picked one of them up and put it on my plate.

"These are a special kind of—" I couldn't catch the strange-sounding name—"and I hope they restore you to good health."

I ate it but I couldn't taste it, any more than I could taste the baked sole that I had for lunch. As soon as I could, I pleaded my cold and left.

When I got home, I found the house empty, Barbara being up at Wagon Train. They had opened the shop just a few days before. Although it was only mid-afternoon, I fixed myself a bourbon, feeling that abstinence at lunch had entitled me to one now. I took the drink into my study and worked for an hour or so, sipping the drink as I read. I was not feeling too well but thought that if I gave in to

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every symptom I would be sick the rest of my life.

My throat began to burn and my stomach pains came back. The dreadful cramps I had the previous time returned. My heart was pounding and I had difficulty in breathing. I called the emergency ambulance service. One of the ambulance crew told me later that they had found me writhing on the floor, clutching the telephone.

In the emergency room two young doctors worked over me, with various distasteful results.

"You're going to be all right," one of them, a Dr. Baldwin, said. The other doctor, an intense young Oriental, Dr. Po, regarded me with a questioning look as if he did not share Dr. Baldwin's confidence.

"My guess is that you've picked up a species of bacteria, salmonella," Dr. Baldwin explained. He patted my shoulder and turned away. Dr. Po was more solicitous, listening carefully when I recounted what I had eaten. After I was put to bed, he made several suggestions to the nurse and seemed about to question me further, but changed his mind and hurried out, as if anxious to get back to the emergency room.

Barbara was plainly upset by my second attack and questioned Dr. Baldwin closely. She looked worried. Her usual air of competence was gone, as though she was faced with circumstances she had not foreseen. Whatever it was, she began talking about Curt Lang.

"Curt drops in at the shop just about every day. Occasionally we have lunch together. He's been very helpful about getting the shop started, sending the motel's truck to pick up stuff for us—things like that."

I mumbled something inane.

"Virginia Fitzsimmons says he reminds her of the seedy, romantic foreign adventurer you used to see in the movies.

"He hasn't got another job yet," she went on. "And he has certainly changed, compared to my memory of him. Hair a lot blonder—dyed, I suppose, and, of course, longer. Wears sunglasses, indoors and out. He's fighting to stay young, Virginia says."

I wondered if she was leading up to the photograph. Or did she just want to talk about him? How could such a discriminating person as Barbara become involved with such an obvious phony? But I was forced to admit that there was no solid evidence to indicate she was. Well then, what was the catty Miss Abby Gottshalk referring to? What about the picture with its loving inscription? Barbara changed the subject and the matter was left hanging between us, unresolved.

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After I had been home from the hospital for several days, I received a visit from Dr. Po.

"It is not proper for me to come to you at a time like this," he finally said, when he had got around to the purpose of his visit. "You are Dr. Hammond's patient, and he and Dr. Baldwin concur as to the cause of your recent illness."

"I have confidence in Dr. Hammond," I said, "but, frankly, Dr. Baldwin has seen too many doctor movies in his youth."

"Certain tests were indicated in your case," Dr. Po went on in his soft precise voice, "when you were in the hospital, but it was decided they were not necessary."

He did not say who had suggested the tests or who had regarded them as unnecessary, but it was not difficult to guess that Dr. Baldwin had overruled Dr. Po.

"If you get an over-ripe chicken salad at Henny's or a well-advanced fish at the Indian Head Inn," I said, "there doesn't seem to be much need of tests."

"Nevertheless, I had some samples taken of your—of various things. On my own I made one simple test, using zinc and sulphuric acid. It gave me the result I expected."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that if you had not received prompt treatment, you would now be dead. You were poisoned. By arsenic."

I told no one of Dr. Po's findings, grimly choosing to wrestle with the threat in my own way.

My first shattering thought was that Barbara had conspired with Curt Lang to get rid of me. I was heavily insured, with Barbara as the sole beneficiary. But violence was just not in her nature, regardless of the state of her emotional relations, if any, with Curt Lang.

Then who? Fitz owed me a large sum of money, a debt only he and I knew about. Payment was due in several weeks and I didn't know if he would be able to pay me. Further, the firm's semi-annual billing had gone out and if something happened to me, it would be simple for Fitz to divert the proceeds to himself. But murder wasn't in Fitz's nature either. Besides, what opportunity did he have? The one dinner I had eaten recently at his house had caused me no ill effects.

Howard Nayler? If I were not around, Fitz would take Howard into partnership. But the gray, equivocal Howard wasn't likely to

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commit a crime no matter how desperately he yearned to be made a partner. Nor did Howard have the slightest opportunity.

Carol Metternick now, with her pastry and coffee, had plenty of opportunity. But what possible motive? How could she profit from killing me? Anyway, she was far too sensible.

What it came down to was that those who had a motive didn't have an opportunity, and those who had an opportunity didn't have a motive. Except Barbara. She had plenty of opportunity and I frankly did not know if she had a motive.

With the end of the year, the work load in the office was such that I was putting in twelve-hour days. I got up early, fixed my own breakfast, and arrived at the office before anyone else. I ate lunch and dinner at Henny's, and avoided alcohol completely. Carol still found time to serve her morning pastry and coffee, which I passed up, saying I was in a touchy condition, which was not true. During all the pressure of year-end work, a plan was forming in my mind as to how I could find out who was trying to kill me.

Whenever a situation changes, any reasoning person tries to identify the factor that was present during the change that had not been present before. In my case there were three. Fitz's debt was coming due for one. Two new people had appeared on the scene—that obsolescent gift to the female sex, Curt Lang, and the winning, efficient legal secretary, Carol Metternick. Curt had lived in Switzerland ever since college, or so I had supposed, so it was impractical for me to go there and see what I could find out about him. But Carol had come to us from a big New York law firm. I would start with her.

I took the early plane down to New York and arrived at the law offices of Henderson, Swinton, Peabody just before noon. I had expected them to be too high-powered to bestow any of their costly time on a country lawyer—a prying country lawyer at that—but to my surprise I was immediately escorted in to see Mr. Bartram Wells, one of the many partners. Mr. Wells reminded me of Fitz, silver and affable, at least outwardly.

"She was the best legal secretary we ever had," Mr. Wells said, after I explained I wished to make a belated check of Carol's references. "But the person you should talk to is Evelyn Seeley. She and Carol Metternick got to be pretty good friends. She's our office manager. All our secretaries reported to her. Let's go around and I'll introduce you."

Evelyn Seeley was a trim compact woman of about 45, dressed in a severe dark suit, and with the impassive face of a blackjack dealer.

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Wells introduced us and then left us to our discussion.

"Carol worked here for five years," she began, in a no-nonsense tone of voice. "She was the best we ever had. I didn't get to know her well until Bill—that's her husband—died."

"I assume she was happily married," I asked, mostly to keep her talking.

"Oh, yes, or so it seemed anyway. When Bill Metternick died—he died suddenly—she asked for several months off. She had accompanied Bill to Europe on business trips several times, so after he died she took off by herself and visited the places where they had been together. France, Italy, Switzerland."

"What was her husband's business?" I asked, and then was sorry I had. What possible connection could it have to what I was trying to find out?

"He was in the chemical importing business."

Before I could recover from the implications of her answer, she went on, "Carol soon returned to her normal, well-balanced self. Together with some of the people here in the office she began going on skiing weekends. They said she was almost of professional quality as a skier. And there she met the man she married."

"Married? I didn't know Carol had remarried."

"Well, most of her friends don't know it. The tipoff to me was when she began going up to that ski resort in the summer. When she resigned here, she told me she had gotten married and was going up there to live."

"What ski resort?"

"A fairly new place. Called Wagon Train."

"Did she tell you the name of the man she married?"

"Yes. Layton or Lawler, something like that. I gather there was a lot of difficulty about something or other, she didn't say what, so they were going to keep it secret for a while. No, Nayler. That was his name—Nayler."

So the good gray Howard and the handsome, efficient Carol were man and wife. Knowing the reputation of the elder Mrs. Nayler as a basilisk, I could understand what difficulty it was that had prompted them to keep their marriage a secret. Howard was not one to face conflict if it could be avoided.

We talked some more but Evelyn Seeley had told me all she intended to. I thanked her and gathered myself to head back to the airport.

"What did her husband die so suddenly of?" I asked.

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"He was poisoned. There were a number of similar cases that summer. You may remember reading about them in the papers. Some canning company had slipped up. Botulism poisoning, they said it was."

Did they indeed, I thought, as I waited for the elevator. Did they indeed?

It was nearly ten o'clock when the taxi from the airport dropped me in my driveway. The house was dark, Barbara having gone to spend the night with her sister, and the leafless trees loomed over it, their naked branches wrestling with some invisible opponent. Under my feet the snow creaked in the cold. Tired, cold, I went directly to bed, but what I had learned that day kept going around in my head and prevented me from sleeping.

Carol had almost daily opportunities to poison me. Now she had a motive in that her husband was being denied a partnership by my stubborn refusal to admit him. Perhaps something more than the wrath of the daunting Mrs. Nayler prompted them to keep their marriage a secret. Time enough to let that fact be known when I was safely out of the way and no connection between my death and Howard's assumption of a partnership would be dreamed of. Time enough then for them to address the problem of old Mrs. Nayler, with the solution already in hand too—a tested, permanent solution.

But I was trained to test conclusions. *Pro arguendo,* as the lawyers say, or at least write, suppose it was not Carol's coffee or pastry that was poisoning me. Suppose Carol's late husband had really died of botulism poisoning. Then what? Who had more opportunity than Barbara? And access to poisons from her shelf of dusts and sprays. How did I know that she was at her sister's tonight and not up at Wagon Train with Curt Lang?

Logical as the possibility was, I refused to admit it. Even if I were to be presented with incontrovertible proof that Barbara had conspired with Curt Lang to kill me, I would not believe it. I decided then and there, alone in the cold house, that if it were true, I would do nothing to prevent it. After such a betrayal by someone I loved as much as I loved Barbara, life would be without value or meaning, and I would permit myself to be killed.

Neither could Fitz have done it. True, he had a motive, but anything as contemptible as poison was not in his nature. I knew there was another side to Fitz that nobody saw, that he wasn't completely the genial, easy-going, wisecracking man he appeared to casual

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observers. But he just could not have done it. And what opportunity did he have?

Curt Lang, Carol Metternick, Fitz's debt coming due—what else was present that was not in evidence before my attacks began? Then it came to me. I was drinking bourbon that Fitz had acquired from his wholesaler acquaintance. Thinking back, I found that on the two occasions that I had drunk Fitz's bourbon from my double bottle, I had become violently sick. But, on the other hand, each of these times I had eaten something Barbara had prepared or something Carol had provided. I remembered the dessert Carol had selected for me at the Christmas lunch. There was nothing I could do now about the food, but the case of bourbon was still in the basement, only one of its twelve bottles opened.

I put on my robe and slippers and went to the basement. The case of whiskey was on the shelf where I had placed it that Sunday when I found it in the garage. Each bottle was sealed by a pink, ribbon-like revenue stamp placed across the cap. Only on the bottle I had opened was the stamp torn. But on this bottle I now saw two revenue stamps, one glued precisely over the other, with the upper stamp loose at one end where it had come unglued. If one were to conceal the fact that the bottle had been opened, it would be necessary to cover the torn stamp with one that was intact.

I carried the case upstairs to the kitchen, put a few inches of hot water in the sink, and up-ended the bottles in the water. When the water had softened the glue of the stamps, I took a razor blade and carefully peeled the stamps from all twelve bottles and blotted them on a paper towel. Each bottle, including the bottle I had already opened and partially used, had a stamp pasted over the original stamp, which had been torn across. Each bottle had been opened and resealed. I had also demonstrated how easy it was to obtain an extra revenue stamp if you took the trouble. Or was I being paranoid? Perhaps the twelve bottles had been inadvertently stamped twice by some taxing authority.

I took a sample from each bottle, and as an afterthought, from my double-spouted bottle. I packed them in a carton and addressed it with a covering letter to a toxicology lab at the state capital. We would soon see if my genial partner was attempting to poison me. If the samples were found to be unharmful, thus eliminating Fitz as a suspect, it would leave only Carol and—But I refused to follow the thought further.

For two weeks nothing happened. By chance I met Jim Owens,

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our youngest associate, at the office water cooler.

"Jim, I've been meaning to thank you for delivering the case of whiskey back before Christmas. I understand you did it because Fitz made a powerful suggestion that you could make yourself useful in fields other than the law."

"All of Mr. Fitzsimmons' suggestions are powerful," he said, "and who am I to refuse?" He grinned. "I just went out to Mr. Fitzsimmons' house one afternoon on company time and picked up the stuff. He had already marked each case with the name of who was to get it. I didn't deliver yours though."

"Oh? I thought Fitz told me—"

"When Howard Nayler heard that Mr. Fitzsimmons had saddled me with the delivery job, he offered to help. After all, there were something like thirty cases and I've got only a sports car. He didn't help much though. He delivered yours and then he lost interest."

So Howard Nayler, who was secretly married to a young widow whose previous husband had died of poison, had deposited in my garage twelve bottles that had been opened and resealed. Further, Jim Owens said the deliveries had been made on company time, but my case hadn't appeared in my garage until a Sunday, giving someone plenty of time to poison the whiskey.

That night when I arrived home there was a letter from the toxicology lab. I tore it open and read the chilling, impersonal findings. Each sample indicated the presence of a lethal quantity of arsenic. So it was Fitz or Howard Nayler. Or was it both? Or neither?

I went to the liquor tray to make a drink—the two-spouted bottle now contained bourbon from the local liquor store—and as I picked up the bottle with its separate compartments, it occurred to me that the bottle was a symbol of the dual aspects of man's nature. Tilt it one way, and good pours forth. When circumstances—or human nature—compel a tilt in the opposite direction, evil spills out. As I stood there looking at the bottle, it came to me how I could find out who had tilted the wrong way.

The next day I didn't go to the office. In the late afternoon I called Fitz and asked if he and Howard would come to the house after work, saying that I wished to discuss a case the three of us had worked on. Hours before they were to arrive, I had everything ready.

I put the double-spouted bottle on the coffee table, the whiskey that filled each side giving out tawny glints in the firelight. I mounted a mirror on the wall of the kitchen in such a position that it picked up images from a mirror in the living room, a mirror that

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reflected the area before the fireplace. For the tenth time I checked that the angle was right, that I could see from the kitchen the reflections of the chairs before the fire, and of the double bottle and glasses on the coffee table.

They came in from the cold, Fitz tall and hearty, Howard clasping his briefcase to his chest like a security blanket. They seated themselves around the coffee table, Howard perching tentatively on the edge of his chair, exhibiting his characteristic insecurity.

"How about something to take the chill off?" I asked.

"Ho, ho, local lawyer continues to drink with the forked tongue," Fitz quipped when he saw the two-spouted bottle.

"In this side of the bottle is that bourbon you got for us, Fitz, the stuff you call Old Browbeat. Funny thing, the original bottle this came in had two revenue stamps on it, one glued over the other."

"Evidence of the thoroughness of our far-flung tax service," Fitz said, and added wryly, "to whom we owe so much."

"The whiskey in the other side of this fancy bottle is inferior—local liquor store stuff, one tax stamp only. I forgot the ice. Here, Howard, will you pour yours and Fitz's. From the two stamp side."

I came back with the ice and under the scrutiny of the two men poured myself a drink from the poisoned side of the bottle. They took sips of their drinks, each watching me closely as I raised my glass to drink poisoned whiskey. I gestured with my glass in a perfunctory semblance of a toast.

"Congratulations to our new bridegroom," I said.

I tried to put the proper combinations of accusation and sarcasm into my voice. Fitz looked at me questioningly. Howard half rose from his chair and quickly sat down again, sensing the threat in my tone. It flashed through my mind that for all his gray quality, Howard could become dangerous when cornered.

"And, of course, to the bride, the ever-competent, recently widowed Carol Metternick. But enough pleasantries. You can't pay me, can you, Fitz?"

Fitz gave me a startled look, his rosy geniality fading.

"You were making sure that I would never claim that hundred thousand you owe me, not to mention my share of the firm's profits."

"Griff, have you gone crazy? What are you accusing me of?"

"Attempted murder. Look, Fitz, you are the executor of my will. You have access to it in the office safe. I submit that you have already worked out the details of settling my estate. Everything is ready for probate, just waiting for one necessary event—my death.

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Even the obituary notice is typed and ready to be sent in. Good old Fitz, the widow's friend. 'Don't worry, little lady, I'll take care of everything. Don't trouble your pretty little head.' I can just hear you saying it."

"Then that's where that notice—" Howard began. I angrily motioned for him to be quiet.

"You didn't plan on having your briefcase stolen. The Stratos boy who found it was scared of doing anything involving the U.S. mail. So he mailed the letters he found in the briefcase. Including the fore-thoughtful obituary notice. You even used one of our personal envelopes out of the supply I kept in the office."

Fitz regarded me stonily, but kept silent.

"Another thing. When my obituary appeared, Fitz, the great kidder, never mentioned it. Why such uncharacteristic restraint?"

"All right, Griff, you've said enough," Fitz said. "I realize you haven't been well lately, but now I'm warning you, if you continue these wild allegations—"

"Let me tell you what my basis is. Just now I identified which side of this double bottle contained whiskey that came from a bottle that had two revenue stamps on it. An innocent person would not have connected the fact of two stamps with poisoned whiskey. You did. When I was in the kitchen, Howard reached across to pour you a drink from the side containing the poisoned whiskey. You reached over and turned the bottle around so he would pour from the other spout. Howard, you saw this?"

Howard nodded, miserable at having to commit himself.

"And so did I." I pointed to the mirror opposite the fireplace. "There's another mirror in the kitchen."

Fitz slumped in his chair, head bowed, eyes fixed on his glass. I think he knew that I would never prosecute, never reveal what he had attempted, that all I would ask was—what?

"No, I can't pay you," he said, not looking up. "But about the other—I'll take steps immediately. But I admit nothing."

"I didn't think you would, in front of a witness. You haven't denied anything either."

He got his coat and went out to his car. I indicated to Howard that he should go with him to be sure that he did nothing foolish.

I sat before the fire for a long time, baffled by the forces which impel a man to attempt the gravest of all crimes. Then I thought: this is where I came in, that late afternoon weeks ago, when I sat here congratulating myself on being the luckiest man in the world.

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My conviction that I was truly fortunate was reinforced when I heard Barbara's car enter the driveway. I would tell her everything that had happened, even, I was determined, my suspicions of her and Curt Lang.

Rosy and fresh from the outdoors, she sat opposite me, listening in silence as I told her of Fitz's debt and the poisoned whiskey and, with much embarrassment, how I suspected that she and Curt Lang had planned to murder me. I told her how, if that had proven to be true, I would have done nothing to prevent it.

"That photograph of him that I found in your car. I couldn't explain it."

"Curt Lang!" she said with a dismissing sniff. "The college girl's idol, the mature woman's affliction. Look, he left two days ago for a job in Idaho."

"But the picture?"

"Curt did favors for us at the shop. So I did him a favor. The *Bulletin* was planning a series of articles on the managers of the big motels at Wagon Train. I was simply taking a picture down to the *Bulletin* for him, to go with the articles. He was vain—and presumptuous—enough to inscribe an extra one for me."

She came across to my chair and held my face between her hands. For a long time she said nothing, and I was swept by so many emotions that I didn't know what to say.

"Oh, Griff, Griff," she said, "you may be a smart lawyer but you're a dumb man."

Then she kissed me.

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We are sorry this isn't a "first story"—we would have felt privileged to introduce Margaret Lacey and her work to the world. But alas for us (though happy for Mrs. Lacey), she "was published for the first time" in the spring of last year, in the "North American Mentor" (Fennimore, Wisconsin). This past summer, Mrs. Lacey tells us, she "put away two hundred rejection slips because there were too many of them to fit on the three-inch nail where they were impaled." Two hundred? It's almost impossible to believe when you read her perceptively imagined and sensitively executed story. But we are grateful for Mrs. Lacey's perseverance and inner faith. By all means, Mrs. Lacey, send us more . . .

THE GLITTER OF GAME DAY

by MARGARET LACEY

Maurice Severn wakes early on Wednesday with a feeling that one of his dreams hovers just out of reach. But it doesn't matter that he can't remember; he knows what was in it. If he's right, today must be Game Day, the first in two months. A familiar excitement overtakes him, several parts fear and an edge of nausea. In case it does turn out to be Game Day, he begins to map in his mind the order of play, then he closes his eyes and takes several deep calming breaths. Somehow Step One always confronts him before he's quite ready for it. Its premises are that if Lena is lying on her right side facing him, the Game is over before it starts. If she's facing the other way, he can move on to Step Two.

She's facing away from him—immediately he's covered with sweat. He's never really sure that this is the way he wants it to go with Step One, and now he has to play through to wherever the thing ends. He gets out of bed, taking some care not to awaken Lena, but he isn't worried; she sleeps till ten or so these retirement days. She looks just as she does every morning of their lives, the night cream caked on her face in puckered patches, her brass-colored hair turbaned. She never combs it out from week to week; she simply

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waits for Ellen at the beauty shop to shampoo and reshape it, after which the whole process of deterioration begins anew. Usually on the day before hair time she doesn't even take off the turban, and she won't go out, not even to eat at the Fair Isle. So he's made that evening his for poker with some of the men from the library. He's thankful that they didn't make him retire from poker too.

In the bathroom he looks at his face in the mirror and as on other mornings he reflects that it could still be taken for 50 instead of 66. He shaves and trims his thin line of mustache; there's hardly any gray in it, and precious little in his hair. Step Two used to be the shaving: if he cut himself so that he bled, the Game was over. But Lena has given him an electric razor and changed all that. He knows he could never get away with not using it. Since Christmas he's been down to six steps, and he started with eight. He tells himself that he's got to do something about it before too long or else the odds will become too heavy in his favor.

Step Two now involves his tie. Back in the bedroom he dresses swiftly and quietly, allowing himself to make tentative plans about location. South Park for today, he decides; it's been over a year since he touched base there. He puts on his new light-blue silk shirt and his navy-blue suit pants, his navy socks, and his dark-blue wingtip shoes. Then he closes his eyes, turns around three times, and reaches into the closet for a tie. The one he grasps turns out to be a muted red and blue houndstooth. When he sees it he smiles and says "Pass" in a whisper. As he knots it, however, he worries that he may be cheating on this one; the back of his mind knows that he always puts that tie a little apart from the others at the extreme right of the rack. Still, Lena is notorious for her random tidying binges; she could easily come along and alter the arrangement, so there remains a good element of chance.

This satisfies him. He completes his outfit with the handkerchief which matches the tie. He can't find it at first and he panics a bit until he remembers that he keeps it, not in his handkerchief drawer, but in the bottom one under his sweaters. "A symphony in blue," he says almost audibly to the full-length mirror. Lena stirs behind him and he leaves quietly without further self-congratulation.

Even before he gets to the kitchen he knows Step Three has been taken care of: Lena ate the last English muffin yesterday for lunch and he didn't go out to pick up any more, although he prefers them above anything else for breakfast. This morning he makes coffee, mixes juices, and punches two pieces of bread into the toaster. Step

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Three says that if there had been English muffins he would have been impelled to make other plans for today.

He has shelved a volume of Keats among the cookbooks and he takes it out and places it beside his plate. When his toast pops up he unearths a jar of Chivers English Marmalade from the back of the refrigerator. Lena won't touch it: it's too bitter, she says, but it suits him perfectly, because he has to drive clear across town to the specialty shop to get it. He spreads the toast with it and eats while he reads Keats:

> Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art—
> Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night,
> And watching, with eternal lids apart,
> Like nature's patient sleepless Eremite . . .

The sonnet and the marmalade comfort him; in fact, they are so comforting that he strongly considers aborting the Game and spending the day in the library, reading Keats, against all the rules. But after a short struggle the Game wins; if he doesn't play it out today it will simply nag at him until he follows it through. He thinks with a small stab of longing about the quiet reading room, about his favorite place in the poetry section—and then lets it go. Tomorrow the library, he promises himself; today the Game.

Before he leaves the house he always has to stop in the study. But this ritual is *not* part of the Game, he reminds himself and anyone else who might be listening. He has kept the room intact by refusing to receive the television set which Lena wants to put there. He makes her keep it in the living room; as a concession he has sacrificed to her his recliner and makes do with his captain's chair.

It's important to have his study; it reminds him that he was once an English professor, and even a poet, at home in Oxford before that awful first year in America, the year when he tried teaching English to seventh graders with such disastrous results. That was before he and Lena fled to Florida, before he fell thankfully into a few years of precarious safety as a reference librarian. Not exciting, those years in the library, but safe. He's proud that he has never failed Lena, not where money is concerned.

Seated at his desk, he selects a key from the ring he always carries with him and unlocks the small top drawer on the right. He suspects that Lena must try the drawer occasionally; maybe she even knows how to pick the simple lock. He wonders what she must think if she

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has discovered that it contains nothing but a studio picture of his first wife and his boys, the family he left for her. If she has seen it she doesn't speak of it.

He thinks vaguely about that time; he supposes that there was once a reason for his having behaved as he did. Perhaps Lena was lovely, perhaps she offered him excitement he felt was passing him by, perhaps her very un-Englishness attracted him. There was no doubt she'd been young—23 to his 45.

Reason there may have been, but no excuse, and so he has never felt justification for keeping in touch with Hilary or the boys, even though he happens to know that one of them, David, is in New York. He knows he has grandchildren—at least four by now, and two of them girls. He wonders if either of the girls looks like Hilary when he first knew her—rosy, blonde, and innocent, yet hauntingly seductive even at twelve, presiding over the Lucky Dip at the church fête in Colchester.

He's stirred by the memory; he shuts the drawer quietly on the upturned photograph and turns the key. He locates his blue suit jacket in the closet and steps out of the house to pick up the newspaper from the sidewalk. Step Four. On many Game Days he's had occasion to curse the laziness of the newsboy, but this morning the child hasn't failed him. The car is standing in the driveway; it's the latest in a long line of dark-colored modestly priced sedans, nothing outstanding about it. Lena wanted a yellow car last time but he put his foot down. He sees that it's quite dirty—even the number plate is almost obscured by dust. After the Game—if he does play—perhaps he'll go get more muffins and then stop at the carwash on the way home.

Though he knows Lena won't hear him go, he still eases the car door shut and tries not to race the motor. Once in the street he begins to feel almost sick again. He has a ten-minute drive ahead of him—Steps Five and Six. He'll have to hurry if he's not to be late. As he drives he recognizes a certain kind of glitter to everything—the other cars, the palm trees, even the pedestrians. He never likes the glitter of Game Day and he wishes he'd remembered to bring his sunglasses.

Step Five is the light at Glen Avenue and Second; it always has to be green or the Game is over. He likes it to be red when he approaches, so that he can idle up to it. Today he's jolted to see that it's already green. He has no idea how much time he has and he feels rage and fear at the thought that the whole Game might have

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to be abandoned. Speeding, he gets through on the yellow and has to pull over for a minute till he stops shaking. He remembers that there isn't much time and gets back onto the road.

When he turns onto Fifth Street he sees immediately that the hurdle of Step Six is already passed. There's a single parking space in a long line of cars backing on the blind windowless wall of South Park Elementary School. On the other side of the street there's nothing but the back of a service station—no houses populated by under-entertained elderly women. The location is perfect, but several times he has been stymied at this late stage because the staff likes to park here too, for the shade.

Once in position, he eases the passenger-door latch so that it can be swung wide without noise, then he settles down to wait with the newspaper in his hands. But he doesn't read; instead he follows with his eyes the chattering groups of passing children. Finally their numbers grow thin, then there are nothing but stragglers; even the patrols are gone. Maurice is beginning to feel pressure in his head. What if he should have to wait till tomorrow? He knows what the waiting does to him.

But at the very last moment a girl with a blonde ponytail comes into view, carrying an armload of books. She doesn't hurry; it's as if she neither knows nor cares what time it is. Obviously she has other things to think about besides the tardy bell. She is utterly charming.

He glances in the rear-view mirror, attempting to implant on his face the smile of a benevolent grandfather. There is no one else in sight. The girl is passing the rear bumper; she hasn't yet seen him. He leans over to swing the door open and tries to control his shaking.

"Little girl," he says softly, urgently. "Oh, little girl."

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a *NEW* Schlock Homes story by

ROBERT L. FISH

On a problemless day (or night) Mr. Schlock Homes will welcome even "the most minor of commissions"—even the delivery of a small box to an archfiend. But then only a fiend incarnate is an adversary worthy of the Great Defective . . .

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SHORT FUSE

by ROBERT L. FISH

It should not be thought that only cases involving either capital crimes or international intrigue earned the attention of my friend, Mr. Schlock Homes. At times, when there were no other problems upon which he could expend his particular talents, Homes was known to take on the most minor of commissions, although even to these he brought his own expertise in a manner it is doubtful any other could hope to emulate. This was particularly true in any case that evoked either his own personal sympathy to one party of a dispute, or his anger with the other, as was evidenced in the affair I find delineated in my notebook as *The Adventure of the Short Fuse.*

It was close upon noon one sunny day in late April of the year '78 when Homes made his appearance at the breakfast table of our quarters at 221-B Bagel Street. I had long since finished my own repast of buttered chutneys, had searched the morning journals for some report of crime that might be of interest to Homes and myself—unfortunately finding nothing—and at the moment was just relaxing and enjoying a quiet pipe, when Homes entered the room, yawning. His sleeping in late, however, was readily forgivable; he had arrived from the north of England but late the night before,

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where he had resolved the mysterious affair concerning young Rudolph Staine, Junior, a case I find outlined in my notes as *The Adventure of the Second Staine.*

Homes seated himself at the table, studied the cold remains of the buttered chutneys, now admittedly slightly rancid, made a grimace of distaste, and came to his feet, wandering to the window to stare down into the street, a frown upon his forehead.

"Homes," I said reprovingly. "You are not eating."

He turned to look at me, a faint smile replacing the frown on his saturnine features. "You are improving, Watney," said he. "You are beginning to note the obvious."

"Thank you, Homes," I said appreciatively.

"You are quite welcome," he replied, and once again turned to stare into the street. Wondering what could possibly attract Homes's attention to the extent of disregarding Mrs. Essex's rancid buttered chutneys, I came to stand beside him and looked down. But all I could see were a young man and a girl kissing each other passionately on the other side of the road. It was certainly no unusual sight in London in these dissolute days, yet it was precisely this sight which seemed to be the focus of my friend's attention. But before I could question him on the matter, Homes spoke over his shoulder.

"Osculation upon the pavement, Watney," said he, "always means an *affaire du coeur.*" He frowned slightly. "In fact," he added, "I believe we shall shortly be involved in the matter, for here to visit us, if I am not mistaken, comes one of the pair of lovers."

I glanced down again. Surely enough, the two had parted, the girl walking quickly down Bagel Street in the direction of the horse-cars, while the young man dodged several hansoms and was making his way to our very door. A moment later there was the sound of footsteps upon the stairs and our page was ushering into our presence the young man we had been observing. He stood in the opening, looking a trifle embarrassed, and holding tightly to a small box in his hands.

"Mr. Homes?" he said, and looked about. "I'm afraid I am disturbing you at your meal."

"It is nothing," Homes assured him in kindly tones as he glanced back at the chutneys. "It is *really* nothing. Pray take the basket-chair, there, and tell me what brings you here. Other than the fact that you are a sapper by trade, come from the Cotswolds, and have a sweet tooth, I am afraid I know nothing of your problem."

The young man's mouth fell open in astonishment. Even I, who

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pride myself on being almost as astute as Homes from my many years of observing him, was completely taken aback. "Really, Homes!" I said chidingly. "Surely you are merely guessing!"

"Not at all," Homes said languidly. "The fact that the young man is a sapper is easily discerned; the marks of maple syrup upon his cravat is a common sign of those who tap the maple trees for their juice. Since maple trees grow principally in the Cotswolds, the area from which he has journeyed to visit us is just as easily deduced. And only a person with a sweet tooth for maple syrup would remain in the trade, since with to-day's growing industrialisation there are many more lucrative positions to be had."

"It is truly amazing!" the young man exclaimed, hastily wiping off his cravat. "While I come from the Isle of Wight rather than the Cotswolds, and while I like sweets as much as the next man, I suppose, it is true that I am a sapper—or was until my recent discharge from Her Majesty's Fourteenth Demolition Division. I can see, Mr. Homes," he continued earnestly, "that what I have heard of you is the truth and that you are, indeed, the man to resolve my problem. I apologise for my carelessness with my pancakes at breakfast this morning, but the plain truth is I have been so upset of late that I scarcely know what I am doing, let alone what I am eating!"

Homes nodded and waited while our visitor adjusted himself to the basket-chair. Then, seating himself across from the young man, Homes smiled at him. "Pray tell me your problem. You may speak quite openly before Dr. Watney, whose attention wanders freely."

"Yes, sir. Well, Mr. Homes," said the young man, "my name is Hosmer Angle, and I am on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, my religion forbids me to hate a person, but on the other hand, with this particular man, I cannot help myself!"

Homes raised an eyebrow at this strange and contradictory statement. The young man edged closer to the end of the chair, holding his small box tightly in his hands as he continued.

"Mr. Homes, let me explain. I am deeply in love, a love I am happy to say is returned, but unfortunately Marie, the girl I love, is already married to a person named Alex Northerland. Northerland is much older than she, probably by as much as three or four years. He was an old friend of Marie's family to whom she turned in desperation when her parents died, and who took advantage of her youth and innocence to force marriage upon her when she was, in all truth, too immature to be aware that true love could exist and should not be confused with gratitude, particularly gratitude ill-placed."

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Young Hosmer Angle paused, breathless, as if wondering exactly which words to choose to continue. Homes waited patiently, smiling at the young man encouragingly. Thus heartened, young Mr. Angle went on, leaning forward, his eyes boring into Homes's.

"Mr. Homes, this Alex Northerland to whom Marie is wed, is a fiend incarnate!"

Homes frowned and raised a hand, interrupting. "He treats her poorly?"

"Oh, no, the miscreant is far too clever for that! He disguises his true baseness by treating her at all times with the utmost kindness and respect!"

"This Marie—is she at times detained? Held a prisoner in her own home?"

"Would that she were, for then I could rescue her!" the young man cried. "No, no! The rascal is far too artful to be caught out like that! He allows her every freedom and is so devilishly Machiavellian as to never even ask her where she has been when she returns."

"Does he restrict her, then, in the matter of money?"

"Oh, no. The archfiend gives her more than ample allowance. But then, he is so filthy rich that in all probability he does not even miss it. Besides, it will all be Marie's money, when—" He apparently felt he was wandering from the point and fell silent.

"A worthy opponent, it appears," Homes observed, and studied the young man over tented fingers. "And where does your dilemma come in?"

"Well, Mr. Homes," the young man said earnestly, "as I stated before, my religion does not permit me to hate a person, yet I find it hard in my heart to forgive Northerland his inhuman behaviour. I thought, therefore, that the least I could do as a sop to my conscience would be to present him with a gift of some sort. Unfortunately, I am not permitted on the premises of Northerland Manor. I was hoping, therefore, that you might be so kind as to deliver it for me." And he held out the small box he had been clutching so tightly. "If you could do it to-morrow, say, at exactly two o'clock in the afternoon? Marie will be with me then in my rooms in Albemarle Street."

"A pleasure," Homes assured him warmly, and picked up the box. "And just what gift do you feel a man of this terrible disposition is worthy of, even as a sop to your conscience?"

"Not a very fancy one, I'm afraid," young Mr. Angle said a bit ruefully. "I'm far from rich, at least not yet, although one always

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has hopes. It is merely an alarm clock, although not a cheap one. Still," he added, brightening, "if you will remember to push this button just before you deliver it, at least Northerland will have an operating mechanism when thirty minutes pass."

"This button? Of course," Homes said, and came to his feet. "If you will leave the number in Albemarle Street with Dr. Watney, I shall be pleased to advise you when this minor commission is executed. And may I wish you the best of luck in the matter of your Marie."

"It is number 16 Albemarle Street," the young man said, and added a bit absently, "although I should imagine I'll know from the journals . . ." He seemed to realise that Homes was already afoot and came to his own feet hurriedly. "I shall never be able to thank you enough, Mr. Homes," he said sincerely, and hurried from the room.

Homes waited until the door had closed upon our visitor and then reseated himself, turning to the shelf behind him, taking down one of his reference volumes, and leafing through it.

"Ah! Here we are," he said with satisfaction. "Sir Alex Northerland, DSC, OBE, BPOE. Member of the stock exchange, has a box at Ascot and another at Earl's Court for the yearly trap-show. Considered one of the wealthiest men in the Empire, a great donor to charities, founder of the Putney Troop of the Boy Scouts, and chief financial supporter for the Home for the Blind." He closed the volume and returned it to its place on the shelf. "A worthy opponent, indeed," he repeated softly. "And if young Hosmer Angle's story contains even the slightest seeds of truth, a devilishly cunning one at that! See how this hypocrite has covered his true character with charity donations and the sponsoring of Boy Scout troops!"

"Reprehensible," I agreed. "But still, what can you do, Homes? After all, you merely agreed to deliver a package to the man."

"Ah!" Homes said sagaciously. "Young Mr. Angle may feel that a gift of a valuable alarm clock is a sop to *his* conscience for hating Northerland, but I am under no such compulsion. As one dedicated to the ferreting out of malfeasors, the least I can do is to investigate this miscreant, Sir Alex Northerland!"

He came to his feet and disappeared into his rooms, removing his dressing-gown as he did so. When he returned a few minutes later, I was surprised to see that Homes was dressed in the costume of a butler, and with his unsurpassable artistry, even managed to look a bit like one.

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"I shall appear at Northerland Manor in the guise of a servant seeking work," said he, adjusting his dickey. "In the servant's quarters there is always a wealth of gossip and I shall shortly know exactly to what depths this fiend Northerland has sunk!" He picked up the small box that Hosmer Angle had left and moved towards the door. "I shall be back soon."

"But, Homes!" I cried. "What if they offer you employment?"

"Then I may be a bit longer," he said thoughtfully, and went down the stairs.

It was late that afternoon when Homes returned, no longer carrying the small box with the alarm clock. I had been at the sideboard, attempting, by adding Jamaican rum to a soft-drink imported from the colony of Georgia, to make it palatable, when Homes came into the room and fell into a chair, shaking his head direly.

"Homes!" I cried. "What is it?"

He looked up at me broodingly. "To call this man a fiend incarnate is to flatter him!" he said heavily.

"But—what happened?" I insisted.

Homes took a deep breath. "I appeared at the rear door of the manor, at the servant's quarters," he said, "and I spoke first to the cook, a pleasant person who not only offered tea, but a plate of properly fresh buttered chutneys. As I ate I queried her.

" 'How does your master treat the staff?' I asked. 'I should not care to work in a place where the staff are treated poorly.'

" ' "Oh, you need have no fears on that score," she replied reassuringly. "Although the mistress can be a bit trying at times, being no better than she should be! But the master is a real gentleman, a wonderful person!" ' " She leaned towards me confidentially. " ' "When I first came to work here as cook, I was also worried about how the staff might be treated, so I spoke with Michael, the first footman. " ' " 'Michael,' I said, 'How are the staff treated here?' " ' "

" ' " ' "Fine!" he replied. "I had the same question when I first arrived, as well, so I asked John, the butler. " ' " ' " ' John,' I said, 'how are the staff treated?' " ' " ' "

" ' " ' " ' " ' "Never a problem with that," John replied. "When—" ' " ' " ' " ' "

" ' " ' " ' "Homes!" I cried, interrupting. "I mean, Homes! I'm completely at sea. Exactly what did you discover?"

"I was just coming to that," Homes said a bit testily. "Well, the upshot of the whole thing was that this Alex Northerland has com-

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pletely fooled his own staff, principally by making conditions at Northerland Manor so good that they do not even suspect his true colours; they believe him to be the finest of men."

"And their feelings towards their mistress?"

"Ah! Here the attitude is quite different. The entire staff are under the impression that their mistress, Marie, is flighty, selfish, and even a bit interfering at times."

"Interfering?"

"Yes. The cook claims she found Marie putting some strange white powder in the master's soup, when she should have known how upset Cook gets with anyone else in the kitchen. The chauffeur, who I only had a minute to speak to, claims he found the mistress filing the brake cable on the master's car one day, although the chauffeur says she should know how much it upsets him to have anyone else use his tools, which he has laid out to his satisfaction. Neither the cook nor the chauffeur seem to realise the poor girl was merely attempting to see that everything was proper for her lord and master."

"And the butler?"

"Oh, his story was of the time he found Marie tying a stout cord across the top of the steps that lead from the master's bedroom; his complaint seemed to be that she had used a granny knot rather than a square knot. It seems he is the actual scoutmaster of the Putney troop."

"It strikes me as a poor reason to be down on the poor girl," I exclaimed. "In fact, it almost seems as if the servants were in a conspiracy against the poor lass," I added, "undoubtedly fed by the lies of the despicable cad who is her husband! It seems a pity that a bounder like that should be the recipient of that fine alarm clock young Hosmer Angle was kind enough to send him."

"I agree completely," Homes said. "So much so, in fact, that I did not leave the alarm clock at Northerland Manor. It struck me as far too expensive a gift, especially coming from a poor lad such as young Mr. Angle."

"But the poor lad's conscience?" I cried.

"Oh, I left something, of course. My old stem-winder. It hasn't been working well of late, so it is a small loss. A contribution, let us say, for a lad whose heart is in the right place."

"And the alarm clock? Surely you did not keep it?"

"Of course not! I dropped it off at 16 Albemarle Street. Not wishing to disturb the lovers, I left a note explaining my actions. I even

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remembered to press the small button, wishing your Hosmer Angle to have the mechanism in operating condition when he discovers it." Homes's geniality disappeared. "I only wish I could have done something to punish this Sir Alex Northerland properly. Ah, well, in time I am sure his sins will catch up with him, as they will eventually with all sinners!"

"Amen to that, Homes," I said, and reached for the bit more of rum that the Georgian soft-drink seemed to require.

I had completed my share of the kippered curries which Mrs. Essex had deigned to prepare for our breakfast and was well into the morning journal the following day when Homes came into the room and dropped into his chair, drawing his napkin from its ring.

"Ah, Watney," said he, watching me turn pages, "I will even accept another minor commission such as the one of yesterday, rather than face the ennui of another problemless day!"

"Possibly you shall not have to, Homes," I said, reading further into the article that had suddenly claimed my attention. "It seems there was a major explosion in Albemarle Street yesterday evening, with several victims. The authorities are convinced it was caused by an infernal device."

"Albemarle Street, eh? Quite a coincidence," said Homes, and his appetite whetted by the possibility of a major problem, he reached for the kippered curries. "An infernal device, eh? Dastardly things! A letter to the authorities offering my services, if you will, Watney!"

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a *NEW* John Jericho story by

HUGH PENTECOST

In which John Jericho, the artist-detective, the huge red-bearded Viking of a man, serves a departed friend . . . Why did it happen in that particular place, at that particular time? Why did it happen at all? . . . Jericho is the grim avenger, the crusader against violence and crime . . .

JERICHO AND THE MEMORIAL NIGHT

by HUGH PENTECOST

Gary Slade dropped dead on a bright summer morning just a year ago. Something like national mourning took place when the news broke that Slade, jogging in the grounds of his Hollywood estate, had suffered a massive coronary. A symbol of American masculinity and male glamor, Gary Slade had come close to matching the late Clark Gable in the hearts of film fans around the world.

Over the years, first in the Broadway theater and then in 15 years of enormous success in movies, Slade had been admired and loved by his peers. Other actors found him considerate and generous. He was highly professional, devoid of any vestige of temperamental ego. A romantic leading man, most of the great ladies of the theater and films had tried to link him with one or another of them.

But the whispers about his possible romances with various glamor girls hadn't stood up very well. Before Gary Slade had any reputation at all, while he was still a young actor working in road companies, summer stock, and minor off-Broadway productions, he had married Marjorie Lang, a non-professional, and that union had lasted for 31 years without any visible sign of a rift along the way.

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Blessed with only one child, a son named Peter, Gary and Marjori had been considered one of Hollywood's rare "perfect marriages."

On a year to the day after Gary Slade's death, friends and admirer decided to hold an evening in his memory, and to honor him at Th Players, a club for actors, writers, artists, and men-of-the-theate in New York. The Players, a city landmark on Gramercy Park, ha once been the home of the great Edwin Booth, foremost actor of hi day. Over the years all the giants of the stage have passed throug its elegant rooms, designed and decorated by Stanford White, dom inated by Sargent's famous portrait of the late Mr. Booth. Gar Slade had been a member. It was the logical place for homage to b paid to him.

It was Peter Slade, aged 29, who approached John Jericho an asked him to be a part of the evening. Jericho, a red-haired, red bearded giant of a man, is an artist, a painter, internationally know for his crusade against terrorism, against man's inhumanity to mar Jericho's cause is reflected not only in the almost harsh vigor of hi brush strokes and colors, but in his personal actions as a fighte against crime. Six feet four inches tall and 240 pounds of hard muscled body, Jericho suggests the image of an ancient Viking wa rior. It should be noted, however, that despite the aura of violenc that surrounds him, Jericho is a warm and gentle friend, capabl of a deep compassion for people in trouble.

He felt some of that compassion for Peter Slade the afternoon th young man called on him in his Jefferson Mews studio in Greenwic Village. Peter Slade had inherited his father's good looks and lith athletic body. Because he was Gary Slade's son his own career ha been spotlighted. Peter was not an actor or interested in theater films, but he performed his specialty before audiences, sometime huge television audiences. He was—more accurately, he had been— professional tennis player. He was fast approaching a competitiv level with such top players as Borg, Connors, and McEnroe whe it all came to an abrupt and tragic end.

Driving on one of the California Freeways, a truck had lost contr and smashed into Peter's car. It was a miracle that he wasn't kille but from his own point of view he might as well have been. H right hand, on which he depended for his skills, was mangled beyor surgical repair. Fate was to strike at him again while he was sti in the hospital—his father's death. Some people may have thougl it was a stroke of good luck for Peter. Deprived of his own mea of making a living, Peter found himself without economic worrie

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thanks to Gary Slade's generous division of his substantial estate between his wife and his son.

That day, in Jefferson Mews, was the first time Jericho had seen Peter Slade since his accident. Jericho had been in the Middle East at the time, at work on the now famous mural in Jerusalem.

"I hoped I'd find you in, Uncle John," Peter said. The "Uncle John" had started when Peter was a child.

"I'm always in to you, boy—if I'm in," Jericho said. "Sit down. Drink?"

"No, thanks."

"Your mother, how is she?"

Peter's wide mouth tightened. "Not good. She hasn't even gotten her second wind. No one can ever take Dad's place. I'm not much good to her. She looks at me and that hurts, too." He hunched up his right shoulder and Jericho noticed that he kept his right hand in the pocket of his summer-tweed jacket.

"What can I do for you, Peter? If you just wanted to talk to an old friend, go ahead and talk."

"It's more than that, Uncle John. The Players are going to hold an Open House to honor Dad—a week from Friday, the anniversary of his death. Mother won't go, but she's thinking of giving the portrait you painted of Dad to the club—if you have no objection."

"Of course not. Gary belongs there—with Booth and Drew and Hampden and Lindsay and King and Drake and the others."

"Would you consider coming and being one of the speakers?" Peter asked. "You were his good friend."

Jericho was not psychic. He couldn't foresee another tragedy.

It was meant to be a festive occasion, not a somber funeral mass—black tie and the lady guests elegantly dressed. Gary Slade had been a man of wit, of endless good humor, with an ironic turn of phrase aimed at self-importance, a not uncommon trait in his fellow actors. Public memories of him were crowded with funny, often uproarious anecdotes. The sponsors of this Open House at The Players were determined that laughter should be the keynote of the evening, and the toastmaster was to be Jack McBain, the old vaudevillian, musical-comedy star, and character-comic who was a master at wrapping audiences around his little finger. Older than Gary Slade, they had been close friends for three decades of working together in theater and films. Jericho wondered if McBain might not turn a little over-sentimental before the evening was done.

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Speakers of the evening were to be Jericho, who would present his portrait to The Players on behalf of Marjorie Slade; the President of The Players; Loraine Hammond, one of Hollywood's most glamorous ladies who had made several films with Gary; and Max Wilson, the acid-tongued critic, who was the author of a biography of Gary Slade announced for publication in the fall. Wilson was not noted for having a kind word for anyone, his fame being based on rapier thrusts to the vital organs of his subjects; but surely, on this night, he would limit himself to revealing little-known anecdotes about Gary that he'd unearthed in researching his book.

There were drinks and a gourmet buffet before the guests settled down in the gracious dining room of the club for the business of the evening.

Jack McBain, calling for order, pointed out that there had been no way to keep alive the memorable performances of Edwin Booth and the many great actors of later years. There were the critics' reviews and some old still-photographs. But Gary Slade would come to life for them for a few minutes while they ran clips from some of his most popular films.

The lights were dimmed, a screen was moved into place, and Gary was alive once more, handsome, vibrant, charismatic. In the middle of a love scene with Loraine Hammond in Gary Slade's modern version of *The Prisoner of Zenda* the screen went blank. The lights came up. There was a murmur of surprise and disappointment from the guests. Jack McBain was standing at his place, bent forward, his hands on the speaker's table. He finally looked up, and Jericho saw that he was a badly shaken man.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the old man said, his voice unsteady, "I have just been given a piece of information that makes it seem sacrilegious for this evening to continue. I—I find it difficult to tell you. Not half an hour ago I was talking to Peter Slade, Gary's beloved son. He seemed so happy about this evening, this gathering of Gary's closest friends. What I have to tell you, God help me, is that Peter's body has just been found in the park across the street, lying at the foot of Edwin Booth's statue. It appears—it seems apparent—that Peter has taken his own life. A gunshot wound—the pistol in his hand—oh, my God, ladies and gentlemen—" The old man sat down and buried his face in his hands, his body shaking with sobs.

Gramercy Park is not open to the public. It lies between 20th and

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21st Streets, east of Park Avenue. It is surrounded by a high iron fence and you can only get into its green interior if you have a key to one of its gates. You acquire a key by living in one of the surrounding buildings, or by special dispensation of the trustees of the Association that owns and controls the park. The Players belongs to that Association, and any member of the club can get a key to the gate by applying to the club doorman.

Eddie, the doorman, was not much help when Jericho questioned him. No one had asked for the key that night. It was now where it belonged, in a small drawer in a cabinet in the coatroom. It was not impossible that someone who knew where it was kept could have taken it, used it, and returned it. Eddie had been kept busy running errands and paging members for their arriving guests. It was a crowded, busy night with regular routines abandoned.

One thing was certain. Peter Slade had not taken the key, let himself into the park, shot himself in the head in front of the Booth statue—and then returned the key.

"He could have taken the key," Lieutenant Mark Kreevich of Homicide said to Jericho, "unlocked the gate, left it unlocked while he returned the key, gone back into the park, and then done himself in."

Kreevich was an old friend of Jericho's. It was a lucky chance that the investigation was in his hands.

"Why would he do that?" Jericho asked.

They were standing together near the Booth statue inside the park. Peter Slade's body, covered by a tarpaulin, was waiting for someone from the Medical Examiner's office to arrive.

"I don't know," Kreevich said. "But there is no way to account for how a man's mind works when he's in a suicidal state."

"You think it's suicide?"

"He was lying there, the gun in his right hand, only one shot fired. What else? Ballistics should lock it up for us."

"In his right hand?" Jericho asked, his voice harsh.

Kreevich, a trim, wiry, bright-eyed man, caught the sharp intonation in Jericho's voice. "Something odd about that?"

"Peter Slade's right hand was useless," Jericho said. "He couldn't even pick up a cup of coffee with it. His fingers didn't work. He'd never have tried to fire a gun with it. If this is suicide, Mark, two and two make five."

The party was over but the guests showed no inclination to leave.

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The bar at The Players, the second-floor lounge, and the dining room were still crowded with people who had come to pay tribute to Gary Slade, and remained to talk in shocked voices about Peter Slade's inexplicable act of self-destruction. Why had he chosen that moment, dedicated to his father, to focus attention on himself? In such a group there is always a corps of self-designated psychiatrists. They had explanations: deep depression over the crippling injury that had ended his athletic career; inability to endure the love that so many people had felt for his father, a kind of love he could never hope to enjoy himself.

John Jericho was searching for different kinds of answers. Who had persuaded Peter to walk out into the park while the memorial was just getting under way? Why a cold-blooded murder? The killer had to have a key to the park in his own right, or know where the club key was kept. He had made one rather stupid mistake, perhaps because he was ignorant of how seriously crippled Peter's right hand was. Wrapping useless fingers around that gun had made it impossible for Jericho to accept suicide, and had also created grave doubts in Lieutenant Kreevich's mind.

There were dozens of places where Peter might have been killed without attracting attention—in any one of a hundred dark alleys, in any prearranged meeting place away from observers. Why this place, this time, with friends everywhere? Because it had to be *now*. Because Peter had to be stopped *now*. Stopped from doing what?

A few dozen people from The Players had come across the street and were crowded outside the gate to the park. As Jericho stepped out through the gate, guarded now by two uniformed cops, he came face to face with Max Wilson, the critic and upcoming biographer of Gary Slade. Wilson was not one of Jericho's favorite people. He was tall, almost cadaverously thin, with a perpetual sardonic smile, as if he found something sourly amusing about the poor jerks who inhabited the rest of the world. He earned a handsome living by making caustic and wounding comments on other people's accomplishments—an actor's performance, a playwright's dialogue, a director's concept.

"Is it true?" Wilson asked Jericho.

"It's true that he's dead," Jericho said.

"Suicide?"

"You pays your money you makes your choice," Jericho said. "Why would he, do you think? You must know as much about the Slade family as anyone."

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Wilson nodded. "Gary gave me the rights to his biography some years ago," he said. "I spent quite a lot of time in their Hollywood place, saw a good deal of Peter. Not a young man with too many resources, I'd guess. Good athlete, cut down just when he was making it to the top. No place to go."

"Why tonight, of all nights?" Jericho asked. "His father being honored."

"Maybe he couldn't face all the praise that was about to be heaped on a dead man," Wilson said. "Psychic envy, what have you."

Jericho turned away. There was one person who might know something about Peter's private life, and that was his mother. She hadn't, Peter had told Jericho, "even gotten her second wind," grieving over Gary's death. Now this, the death of her only child. God, what a night for her.

Jericho had come to know and be rather fond of Marjorie during the time when he'd been painting Gary Slade's portrait. In a world of super-egos—in Hollywood—Marjorie had seemed shy, almost totally withdrawn from her husband's professional orbit. The Slades didn't have big parties, didn't entertain on a lavish scale. Gary did his job, gave his personal brand of excitement to the outside world, and came home to his shy, quiet, adoring wife.

Jericho, something of a cynic, had wondered at first how this almost flamboyant, outgoing, apparently gregarious man could be satisfied with a woman so out of touch with the glamor her husband encountered every day. He came to believe that their relationship, begun as passionate young love before anyone had ever heard of Gary, had grown into a deep and abiding affection that nothing on earth could shake. Seeing them together had made Jericho envious.

After Gary Slade's death, his Hollywood property was liquidated and Marjorie had bought a remodeled brownstone on New York's Upper East Side. Peter, attempting to rehabilitate himself after the accident that had ended his career, had moved in with his mother. They needed each other.

Jericho tried phoning Marjorie from The Players but there was no answer. Instinct told him that Marjorie, undoubtedly notified at once about Peter, was simply not answering the phone. Jericho took a taxi uptown.

He stood in the vestibule of the handsome old house, his finger on the doorbell. The door was opened the small distance an inside chain permitted and he found himself confronting someone he had forgotten about.

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Red Dargan had been Gary Slade's dresser and valet for the last 15 years of his career, a trusted friend with an Irish wit that Gary cherished. Dargan was wearing the white coat of a house servant, and his face was angry till he recognized the caller.

"It's you, Mr. Jericho," he said.

"How is she?" Jericho asked.

"How do you imagine?" Dargan asked. "Let me get this open for you." The door closed for a second while Dargan released the chain. Then it was opened wide. "Come in."

"Someone has told her?" Jericho asked, stepping into the dimly lit entrance hall.

Dargan's mouth tightened. "A couple of dozen so-called friends have phoned," he said. "Reporters been storming the door."

"Has she talked to anyone?"

"No. God help her, she's got to handle this herself. Suicide is just about impossible for her to take."

"*If* it was suicide," Jericho said. "I didn't know you were here with her."

"Since Gary died. She had to have someone to look out for her. What do you mean, 'if' it was suicide?"

"I think, Red, he was murdered," Jericho said. "I'd like to talk to her. She may be able to fill in some missing gaps. Who had it in for Peter, Red? Who hated him? Who was afraid of him and why?"

"I'll see if she'll talk to you," Dargan said.

Marjorie Slade, in her early fifties at most, had always had a kind of little-girl, ageless look. Tonight she was an old woman. Her eyes were swollen, the lines at the corners of her mouth looked as if they had only just been etched there. She stared at Jericho, and he could have been a total stranger.

"Marjorie, it's John—John Jericho," he said.

She was sitting in an armchair, eyes fixed on the dead, gray ashes in the fireplace. She gave no sign that she had heard Jericho or recognized him.

"I don't know what to say to you, Marjorie, except that I'm convinced Peter didn't kill himself and that I want to prove it."

Nothing. No response.

"I think you could help me," Jericho persisted.

After a moment she turned her head. Her eyes were blank. Then she spoke in a voice he'd never heard before. "Until tonight he didn't know that I knew," she said, "and I didn't know that he knew."

"Knew what, Marjorie?" Jericho asked when she didn't go on.

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No answer. She sat staring into the ashes, dead as her life must now seem to her. Dargan, who had slipped into the room, touched Jericho on the shoulder. The two men left together.

"She should see a doctor," Jericho said.

Dargan's face was twisted in pain. "There's no medicine that will cure what ails her," he said.

"She could do herself permanent harm."

"I'll watch her," Dargan said. "I'll watch her, I promise. Gary loved her so very much, you know."

"And Peter?"

"Her son, for God's sake!" Dargan said. "Her flesh and blood!"

"Did you hear what she said to me?" Jericho asked. " 'He didn't know that I knew, and I didn't know that he knew.' Make any sense to you, Red?"

Dargan shook his head. "She said the same thing to me earlier, but it didn't add up to anything for me."

Max Wilson didn't look pleased to see Jericho standing outside the door of his apartment. Wilson, too, lived in a remodeled brownstone on the East Side, a street-level apartment with a private entrance. It was about one in the morning. Wilson, just home from The Players, had removed his dinner jacket, black tie, and cummerbund. He had made himself a dark-looking drink and was holding it as he opened the door. There was a chain here, too.

"Oh, it's you," he said.

"I need to talk to you, Wilson," Jericho said.

"Can't it wait?" Wilson asked. "I'm pretty well shaken up after tonight. Tomorrow sometime; you name it."

"Now," Jericho said. "I've managed, by waking up an unhappy secretary at the Park Association, to find out that you are a nonresident who has a key to the park."

"So what?" Wilson said.

"So we can talk now, or I'll come back with the police and a warrant," Jericho said.

A nerve twitched at the corner of Wilson's mouth. "I don't understand what my having a key to the park has to do with anything," he said. "But if you must, you must." The door closed and then opened wide.

The walls of Wilson's living room were covered with photographs of famous people in the theater and films. Gary Slade occupied a place of honor over the mantel above the fireplace.

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"What's all this about a key to the park?" Wilson asked. He didn't suggest that Jericho sit, nor did he offer a drink.

"I don't believe for a minute that Peter Slade shot himself," Jericho said.

"My God, man, he had the gun in his hand!"

"A useless hand that couldn't have managed a gun," Jericho said. "I think someone persuaded Peter to go into the park with him. That someone had a key. That someone had to get rid of Peter."

"Interesting theory," Wilson said. "But let me point out to you, Jericho, there are dozens and dozens of people who have keys to the park. There were a couple of hundred people at The Players tonight who had access to the club key. Why pick on me as a suspect? If there is anything at all to your notion—"

"Do you have a copy of your book on Gary Slade here?" Jericho asked.

"It's already in the publisher's hands. Why?"

"Somewhere in the text there may be something that would explain why Peter was dangerous to you. Had he warned you against printing something about Gary? Had he threatened to keep you from making a small fortune out of your book?"

"Your wheels must be loose, man," Wilson said. "My publisher has libel lawyers. There's nothing in the manuscript that could be dangerous to them or to me. Peter had read the script as a matter of courtesy."

"And Marjorie?" Jericho's voice was glacier-cold.

"Peter had the manuscript at home with him for several days. I suppose Marjorie read it. She didn't like to talk about Gary, so I had no direct contact with her. But Gary gave me a go-ahead on it—in writing. My publisher has that clearance in their files. So, suddenly, tonight Peter threatens me with something and I take him into the park, shoot him, and fake a suicide? You're dreaming, Jericho!"

The doorbell rang, shrill, persistent.

"What the hell is this, Grand Central Station?" Wilson said. But he was obviously relieved to be interrupted. He walked out into the vestibule, leaving Jericho alone.

There was the sound of the door opening.

"Marjorie!" Jericho heard Wilson say.

Then he heard Marjorie's voice, flat, emotionless. "You killed him, Max. You killed him when he told you what he was going to do."

"For God's sake, Marjorie—" Wilson began, and there was terror in his voice.

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Jericho moved quickly. Marjorie stood just inside the door pointing a small pearl-handled revolver at Wilson, holding the gun in a very steady hand. Her eyes flickered for an instant.

"I'm sorry you're here, John," she said. "I know it will cause you pain to have to testify against me. I hoped I could put an end to him without any tomorrow."

Jericho, standing just to the right of Wilson, struck a savage, backhanded blow to the critic's neck. Wilson went down as if he'd been hit by lightning. Jericho stepped over him and walked straight up to Marjorie Slade.

"You sweet, silly idiot," he said, and took the gun away from her. She suddenly clung to him, sobbing out of control.

"Why did you have to be here?" she cried out.

"Peter was my friend," Jericho said.

"Correct me, Max, if I go wrong somewhere," Jericho said, a note of sardonic humor in his voice. Max Wilson was hunched in an armchair in his living room, holding an ice bag to his bruised neck. Lieutenant Kreevich of Homicide sat facing him, a small notebook on his knees. Jericho stood with his back to the dead fireplace, under the photograph of Gary Slade.

"He's out of his mind!" Wilson said.

"Want to sue me for assault with a deadly weapon, Wilson?" Jericho asked. "After all, I did save your life—for the time being."

"I need facts, Johnny," Lieutenant Kreevich said.

"I know, Mark, I know." Jericho turned and looked up at the photograph of a smiling Gary Slade. "Every man's foot slips once or twice in a lifetime," he said. "A decent man, a loyal and devoted husband, surrounded by temptations you and I wouldn't believe—women so glamorous, so gifted, so talented, so—what shall I say—carnivorous? He could have played the field but only once in thirty-one years did he turn away from his devoted wife. Mona Bracken."

"*The* Mona Bracken?" Kreevich asked.

"*The* Mona Bracken."

"She committed suicide! What—ten years ago?"

Jericho nodded. "Hopelessly in love with Gary, and for a few months she was more than he could resist. Eventually he got back in balance, realized that all that really mattered were his wife and his son. He ended the affair, and Mona Bracken wrote down a detailed record of it, and then took an overdose of sleeping pills. That

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record, that suicidal accusation of Gary Slade, never became public because it was found by a friend before the authorities got into the act. The friend who came into possession of Mona's death statement was Max Wilson."

"True, Mr. Wilson?" Kreevich asked.

"Oh, it's true. It's part of Max Wilson's about-to-be-published book about Gary Slade," Jericho said. "We live in a nasty world, Mark. People in the public eye die, and scavengers make fortunes revealing unpleasant truths about them. Gary Slade's perfect marriage was a fraud and Mona Bracken killed herself because she lost, because she couldn't hold a passionate lover—people get rich on that kind of garbage."

"Wilson waited ten years to get rich?" Kreevich said.

"He didn't wait at all," Jericho said. "He went to Gary Slade with what he had. Mona Bracken was dead. There was nothing Gary could do for her, but Marjorie, Gary's wife, was alive. Gary was prepared to do anything to save her pain, and so he paid for months, for years, to keep her from knowing. And then one day he died suddenly. End of a steady income for Max Wilson. He didn't choose to live without it. And so he went to Peter Slade, and Peter refused to keep the payments going. He didn't want his mother hurt, but he wouldn't submit to blackmail.

"Wilson had another way—his book about Gary. In his lifetime Gary had given Wilson the rights to his life story. Part of the blackmail. Now, if Peter wouldn't pay, there was the book, containing Mona Bracken's sensational account of a love affair with Gary. It would be a bestseller, probably be a movie. Gary would, in a way, pay to the bitter end."

"Which brings us to last night," Kreevich said.

"Peter knew what was coming, guessed that Wilson might use the memorial at The Players to reveal some hints about what his book contained. His mother, Peter thought, had to be prepared. He went to her and told her what he knew, only to discover that she'd always known about Mona Bracken. Some 'kind' friend, some gossipmonger. But Gary had come back to her. That was all that mattered.

"Tonight she said to me, 'He didn't know that I knew, and I didn't know that he knew.' There was no one to be saved any longer! The truth could be told and would hurt no one. But there was someone who could be punished—a blackmailer! 'Print one word about my father and Mona Bracken, speak one word about it at The Players

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tonight, and I'll let the world know just what you are.'

"Peter said something like that to you, didn't he, Wilson? And you saw a way to still be rich, and you asked him to go out in the park with you, away from The Players crowded with Gary's friends, presumably to discuss it with him. He didn't dream how far you would go in order to peddle your scandal."

"Proof?" Kreevich asked.

"The proof is up to you, Mark," Jericho said. "There must be records of the payments. Marjorie and Red Dargan, Gary's dresser and friend, can help you. The truth will end this swine's career. If you can hang him for murder, so much the better." Jericho's cold eyes turned to Wilson. "And I will let the truth be known. You can count on that, buster."

DETECTIVERSE

UNBRIDALED PASSION

by MARK GRENIER

"I was out of my head," pleaded Clyde,
When they asked why he'd murdered his bride.
But the doctors opined,
"He was in his right mind."
So the judge said, "He's fit to be tried."

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EAST MEETS WEST

by GLORIA ORLICK

A young Chinese named Chuan Lee
Wed a French maid who was wantonly.
She shared her charms with one and all,
Lee knifed her in a dreadful brawl.
"Purely Occidental" was Chuan's plea.

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a ***NEW*** crime story by

SIMON BRETT

This is more than a crime story. It is the story of a marriage going "through a sticky patch," of raising two boys aged ten and six, of tidying a house daily, of the anxieties and aggravations of family troubles, of social ambitions and status symbols, of all the threads that form the tapestry of living. But look for the scarlet threads, especially those worn thin from stress and ready to snap . . .

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

by SIMON BRETT

"Your wife tells me you're going to take up shooting," said Alex Paton, during a lull in the dinner-party conversation.

Kevin Hooson-Smith flashed a look of annoyance at his wife, Avril, but smiled casually and responded, "Well, thought it might be rather fun. You know, at some point. When I've got time for a proper weekend hobby. Old Andersen keeps us at it so hard at the moment I think that may be a few years hence."

He laughed heartily to dissipate the subject, but Alex Paton wasn't going to let it go. "But Avril said you'd actually bought a shotgun."

"Well . . ." Kevin shrugged uncomfortably. "Useful thing to have. You know, if the opportunity came up for a bit of shooting, one wouldn't want to say, No, sorry, no can do, no gun." He laughed again, hoping the others would join in. Surely he'd got the words right. If Alex Paton or Philip Wilkinson had said that, the others would certainly have laughed. But they didn't, so he had to continue, "You shoot at all, Alex?"

"Not much these days. Pop off the occasional rabbit if I go down to the country to see Mother. Father left me his pair of Purdeys,

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which aren't bad. What make was the gun you got, Kevin?"

"Oh, I forget the name. Foreign."

"Dear, dear. Some evil Continental popgun." They all laughed.

"Absolutely," said Kevin. At least he'd got that right. "More wine, Alex?"

"Thank you."

"It's a '71 Pommard."

"I noticed."

Kevin busied himself with dispensing wine to his guests, but Alex was still not deflected from the subject. "Avril said she thought you were going off shooting this weekend."

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe. Will you have a little more, Elizabeth? Fine. No, I saw something about one of these weekend teaching courses, you know, in shooting . . . We all have to learn sometime, don't we?" Kevin laughed again.

"Oh, yes," Alex agreed. "If we don't already know."

Philip Wilkinson came kindly into the pause. "You know, anyone who's keen on shooting ought to chat up that new girl who's just started cooking the directors' lunches. Davina Whatsername—"

"Entick," Kevin supplied.

"Yes. Her old man's Sir Richard Entick."

Alex Paton was impressed. "Really? I hadn't made that connection. Well, he's got some of the best shooting in the country. Yes, keep on chatting her up, Kevin."

Kevin laughed again, but again alone. They were silent, though there was quite a lot of noise from the cutlery. Avril hoped the steak wasn't too tough. She had done it exactly as the Cordon Bleu monthly had said. Well, except that had said *best* grilling steak, but the best was so expensive. The stuff she had got had been expensive enough. She was sure it was all right.

Maybe they weren't talking because they were too busy eating. Enjoying it. The other two wives hadn't said much all evening. Maybe the wives of stockbrokers from Andersen Small weren't expected to say anything. Well, she wasn't going to be totally silent and submissive. Particularly with an empty wine glass.

"Hey, Kev, you missed me on your rounds. Could I have a bit more wine?"

Kevin somewhat ungraciously pushed the wine bottle toward her.

"Kev," Alex Paton repeated. "That's rather an attractive coining."

Kevin was immediately on the defensive. Though he smiled, Avril

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recognized the tension in his jaw muscles. "Actually, the name Kevin is quite old. Came across something about it the other day. Means 'handsome birth.' There was a St. Kevin way back in the Sixth Century. A hermit, I think. In Ireland."

"Ah," murmured Alex Paton. "In Ireland."

They all laughed at that, though neither Kevin nor Avril could have said exactly why. Emboldened by his success, Alex Paton went on, "And tell me, what about Hooson-Smith? Does that name go back to the Sixth Century?"

After the laugh that greeted that one they were all silent again. Kevin didn't start any new topic of conversation, so Avril decided it was her duty as hostess to speak. The sound of a car at the front of the house provided her cue.

"I bet that's our next-door neighbor moving his car. You know, he's really strange. Very petty. He gets terribly upset if he can't park his car exactly outside his front door. And I mean exactly. We have known him to get up at three in the morning and move it, if he hears someone moving theirs and leaving a space. I mean, isn't that ridiculous? It's no trouble just to walk a couple of yards, but he always wants to be exactly outside. I hope we never get as petty."

They were all looking at her. She didn't know why. Maybe she had spoken rather louder than usual. She felt relaxed by the wine. It had been a long day. All the usual vexations of the children and tidying the house and then, on top of that, cooking this dinner party. Kevin insisted that everything had to be just so for his colleagues from Andersen Small. She didn't really see why. It was not as if they had ever been invited to them. And the wives didn't seem real, just exquisitely painted clothes-horses, not real women whom you could have a good natter with.

Alex Paton broke the pause and responded to her speech. "Yes, well, fortunately that's a problem we don't have to cope with. We are blessed with a rather quaint, old-fashioned device called a garage."

After the laugh Philip Wilkinson started talking about the intention of Andersen Small to open an office in Manila, and the attention moved away from Avril.

Only Kevin was still looking at her. She seemed to see him through a swimmy haze. And there was no love in his expression.

"I don't like to leave the washing up till the morning, Kev."

"Well, do it now, if you feel that strongly about it." He was already

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out of his suit and unbuttoning the silk shirt that had been a special offer in the *Observer*. "All I know is, it's after one and I have a heavy day tomorrow. I have a long costing meeting with Andersen first thing."

"I've got a lot to do tomorrow too."

"Having coffee with some other under-employed woman, then tea with someone else."

"No, not that. I've hardly met anyone since we've been in Dulwich. Not like it was in Willesden."

"Granted the people here are rather different from those in Willesden. Better for the boys to grow up with." Kevin was now down to his underpants. He turned away from her to take them off, as if embarrassed.

"But the boys don't grow up with them. They spend all their time traveling back and forth to that bloody private school and don't seem to make any friends."

"Don't say 'bloody.' It makes you sound more Northern than ever."

"Well, I am bloody Northern, aren't I?"

"There's no need to rub everyone's face in it all the time, though, is there?"

"Anyway, I'm no more Northern than you are. I just haven't tarted up my vowels and started talking in a phony accent that all my posh friends laugh at."

"They do not laugh at me!" Kevin was dangerously near the edge of violence.

Avril bit back her rejoinder. No, calm down. She hadn't wanted the evening to end like this. She lingered in front of the dressing table, unwilling to start removing her makeup. It had used to be a signal between them. Well, more than a signal. She would start to remove her makeup and he would say, "Come on, time enough for that. We've got more important things to do," and pull her down onto the bed. Now he rarely seemed to think they had more important things to do. Now, she felt, he wouldn't notice if she never even put on any makeup.

He was in his pajamas and under the duvet, his back unanswerably turned to her side of the bed. (Why a duvet? She hated it. She loved the secure strapped-in feeling of sheets and blankets, the tight little cocoon their bed had been back in the flat in Willesden.)

Then she remembered their new chore. "Have you potted James?"

"No."

"But I thought we'd agreed you'd do it."

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"You may have agreed that. I haven't agreed to anything. Anyway, it's ridiculous, a child of six needing to be potted."

"If he isn't, he wets the bed."

"If he is, he still seems to wet it. It's ridiculous."

"It's only since he's been at that new school."

"I don't see what that has to do with it."

"It has everything to do with it. He hates it there. He hates how all the other boys make fun of him, hates how they imitate his accent."

"Perhaps that'll teach him to improve his accent."

"What, you want another phony voice in the family?"

"*AVRIL! SHUT UP, SHUT UP, SHUT UP!*" He was sitting up in bed, his face red with fury.

Avril again retreated and went and potted James. When she came back, Kevin was pretending to be asleep. The rigidity of his body showed he wasn't really. She knew his mind was working, rehearsing tiny humiliations, planning revenges, planning more success. He worked hard to make himself what he wanted to be.

She sat down at the dressing table and picked up a new jar of cream to remove her makeup. But she didn't open it. Somehow she felt something might still happen; he might get out of bed and put his arms round her. "Kevin . . ."

The totality of his silence again gave the lie to his appearance of sleep.

"Kev, did you mean that about not going away this weekend?"

"No, I'm going."

"On this shooting course?"

"Yes."

"But you told Alex you might not."

"Because it wasn't his business. I was bloody annoyed at you for starting talking about shooting anyway."

"But you only bought the gun this week. And they seemed to know about it. I thought at last there was a common subject we could all talk about."

"Well, you were wrong. In the future stick to talking about cooking or children or the next-door neighbor's car. And for Christ's sake let me go to sleep!"

"So you're definitely going this weekend?"

"Yes."

"Taking the car?"

"Yes. Why do you ask?"

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"I was thinking, if you weren't here, I could take the kids up to see Mum."

"All the way to Rochdale?"

"It would be a break. She'd love to see them. And now you've taken over the fourth bedroom it's very difficult for her to come and stay down here."

"I need a study. But even more than that I need sleep."

"We could go up to Rochdale by train."

"What? Do you have any idea how much fares are these days?"

"I'd just like to see Mum. She's getting on and she was pretty knocked out by that bout of flu."

"If you can afford it out of the housekeeping, then go by all means."

"You know I can't. You'd have to pay."

"Well, I can't afford to."

"You can afford a brand-new shotgun and a shooting course and bottles of wine and—"

"Avril!" Kevin sat up again in bed. This time he was icy cool, even more potentially violent than he had been when he was shouting. "I make all the money that comes into this household, so will you please leave it to me to decide how it should be spent. From an early age I have tried to better myself and I intend to continue to do that. When I die, the boys will be left in a much better position than where I started. I know what I'm doing."

Avril sighed. "It depends on your definition of 'better.' From where I'm sitting, everything seems to be a lot worse than it ever was."

"I'm sorry, Avril. If you can't appreciate the improvements I've brought into our lives, then I'm afraid there is no point in continuing this rather fruitless discussion."

"Right." Avril opened the jar of cream. "Right, I am now going to remove my makeup."

"Fine." Kevin looked curiously at the jar. "What's that stuff? It's new."

"It's called rejuvenating cream."

"Left it a bit late, haven't you?" he said and turned back into the duvet.

By eight o'clock on Saturday night Avril was exhausted. The boys were so highly strung at the moment. They were so tensely on their best behavior at the new school that the release of the weekend made them manically high-spirited and quarrelsome. Kevin's absence didn't make things any easier. Though Avril often resented,

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or even laughed at, his performance as the stern Victorian *pater-familias*, it did curb the boys' worst excesses. Without him there, and having made no friends in the area, the boys put all their emotional pressure on their mother. She had to be playleader, entertainer, referee, and caterer.

By eight o'clock, when she had finally dragged them away from the television and got them into bed, largely by brute force, she was absolutely drained. She collapsed on the sofa in the sitting room and once again everything seemed to swim before her eyes.

A pall of depression draped itself over her. She tried to lift it by using her mother's eternal remedy, counting her blessings. She could hear her mother's voice, with its warm Lancastrian vowels, saying, "Now come on, our Avril, cheer up. Remember, there's always someone worse off than yourself. You just count your blessings, young lady."

She felt a terrible lonely nostalgia and an urge to ring her mother immediately. But no, Mum needed her help now; she mustn't ring and burden the old lady with her troubles. That was giving in.

No, come on, our Avril, count your blessings.

Right, for a start, there were a nice house, two lovely boys, a very successful husband making far more money than any of the other boys from Rochdale you might have married. Okay, marriage going through a sticky patch at the moment, but that was only to be expected from time to time. Kevin's was an exacting job, and it was only to be expected that some of the tension he felt should be released at home. It was her job as a wife to make that home an attractive place for him to return to and relax in.

And if he needed to get out sometimes on his own, she mustn't make a fuss. This shooting weekend would probably do him a lot of good. Do them both a lot of good, give them a break from the claustrophobia of marriage.

And he'd been so excited about the gun. He seemed to have spent all his spare time that week cleaning it and oiling it, fiddling with all the little pads and brushes that he had bought with it. And this weekend was his chance to show it off. It was no different from James's desire to take his new Action Man to school on his birthday.

And at least it wasn't a woman. Let him fiddle with guns to his heart's content so long as he wasn't fiddling with another woman. True, he hadn't been fiddling with her much recently, but that again was just a phase. It would get better.

She started to feel more confident. Good God, they hadn't kept the

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marriage going from Rochdale, through all his time at college, the squalid flat in Willesden, his awful job in I.C.I., bringing up small children, all that pressure and aggravation, for it to fall apart now.

No, it would be all right.

Good old Mum. It always worked. Count your blessings and you'll feel better. Come on, they breed them tough in Rochdale. Pick yourself up, get yourself a drink, and cook yourself some supper.

The sherry bottle was empty.

Oh, no. She couldn't really go out to the off-license and leave the boys alone in the house. They'd never wake, but—no, she couldn't. Anyway, come to think of it, she hadn't got any cash. The housekeeping allowance didn't seem to go far these days, and with that dinner party in the middle of the week there was nothing left.

Damn. She could really use a drink.

On the other hand . . . Upstairs in Kevin's study there was a whole huge rack full of wine. All those bottles that involved so much correspondence with what he called his "shipper" and so much consultation of books on wine appreciation and tables of good years and . . .

Yes, Kevin could certainly spare her a bottle of wine. A small recompense for her letting him go off for the weekend on his own. She wouldn't take one of his most precious ones, not one of the dinner-party specials, just something modest and warming.

His study was unlike the rest of the house. It was the spare bedroom, but he had moved the bed out and had the room decorated in dark green. There was an antique (well, reproduction) desk and leather chairs. It sought to capture the look of a gentleman's club.

The boys were never allowed inside. Avril was discouraged from entering except to clean. The difference in décor seemed symbolic of a greater difference, as if the room had declared U.D.I. from the rest of the house.

The wine rack covered one whole wall. The range was extensive. Kevin approached the purchase of wine as he did everything else, with punctilious attention to detail and a desire to do the correct thing.

Avril chose a bottle of 1977 Côtes du Rhône, which surely couldn't be too important. Anyway, he owed her at least that.

There was a corkscrew on his desk, so she opened it straightaway. The presence of the corkscrew suggested that Kevin himself drank an occasional bottle up there, which in turn suggested that somewhere he must have glasses.

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She opened the closet by the window. She didn't notice whether there were any glasses. Something else took her attention.

Standing upright in the closet, with all its cleaning materials ranged neatly beside it, was Kevin's new shotgun.

Avril swayed for a moment. This dizziness was getting worse. She supported herself against the window frame and looked out into the road.

Parked exactly in front of their house was a silver-gray Volkswagen Golf.

It was Monday evening before she got a chance to confront him. He had arrived back late on Sunday, and Monday morning was the usual scrum of forcing breakfast into her three men and rushing the boys through heavy traffic to their distant private school.

All day she phrased and rephrased what she was going to say to him, and when the opportunity came she was determined not to shirk it. He had bought some sherry and poured her a drink, a perfunctory politeness which he performed automatically every evening before retiring upstairs with his briefcase to work until told that his supper was ready.

She took the glass, and before he could get out his "Just going up to do a bit of work," said, "I see you didn't take your shotgun away with you for your shooting weekend."

He looked first surprised, then very annoyed. "You've been up rooting round my study." When he was angry, his voice lapsed back into Lancastrian. The "u" in "study" sounded as in "stood."

"I went up there."

"Well, I wish you bloody wouldn't! I've got a lot of important papers up there and I don't like the thought of getting them all out of order."

But she wasn't going to be deflected so easily. "Stop changing the subject. I want to know why you didn't take your precious brand-new shotgun with you when you went off on this shooting weekend."

He smiled patronizingly. "Oh, really, Avril. You don't know the first thing about shooting. It isn't just something you can step straight into. You have to learn a lot of theoretical stuff first—you know, safety drill and so on. You don't start handling guns straightaway. I knew that, so I left the gun this time."

"This time? You mean there will be more weekends?"

"Oh, yes. As I say, it's not something you can pick up overnight.'

She looked downcast.

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He put his arms round her. "Why don't we go upstairs?"

She looked up into his eyes gratefully.

The phone rang.

"You get it. It's bound to be for you. Join me upstairs." And he went up.

After the phone call she found him in the study rather than the bedroom, but she was too upset to register his change of intention. "It was Mrs. Eady."

"Mrs. Eady?"

"Who lives next door to Mum. Kev, Mum's had a stroke."

"Oh, no. Is she—I mean, how is she?"

"Mrs. Eady says it wasn't a bad one, but I don't know what that means. I'll have to go up there."

"I suppose so."

"Straightaway. I'll have to. Can I take the car?"

"It's not going to be very convenient. I've got one or—"

"Kev . . ."

He crumbled in the face of this appeal. "Of course. Are you really going to go straight off?"

"I must. I can't just leave her."

"What about the boys?"

"You can manage for a couple of days."

"But getting them to school? If you've got the car—"

"Oh, God, yes. Look, there's Mrs. Bentley. Lives round in Parsons Road. Her son goes to the school. I'm sure she'd take them too."

"How well do you know her?"

"Hardly at all. But this is an emergency."

"Will you ring her?"

"No, you do it, Kev. I've got to dash." She started looking round the room for a holdall to take with her.

"I think it would be better if you rang, Avril. Avril? What are you looking at, Avril?"

It was nearly dark, but the study curtains were still open. The light from a streetlamp shone on the silver top of the Volkswagen Golf.

"That car. It's the third day it's been parked outside."

"So what? Lots of people park round here. It's near the station."

"But that car hasn't moved for three days."

"Perhaps someone's left it while they went on holiday."

"I don't think so."

"Well, what do you think?"

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"I don't know, Kev." Abruptly she moved from the window. "I must go."

The cars on the M1 kept blurring, losing their shape and becoming little blobs of color. Avril clenched her jaw and tensed the muscles round her eyes, fighting to keep them open. In three nights she couldn't have had more than an hour's sleep. Driving through Monday night and then the worry about Mum.

The fact that the stroke had been so slight and Mum had seemed so little affected by it only made things worse. The incident became a divine admonition. It's nothing this time, but next time it could be serious, and there's you living over 200 miles away.

Not that Mum had said that. She wouldn't. She was temperamentally incapable of using any sort of emotional blackmail. But Avril's mind supplied the pressure.

No, Mum had been remarkably cheerful. She fully expected to die soon and regarded this mild stroke as an unexpected bonus, a remission. And she was delighted to see Avril, though very apologetic at having "dragged her all this way!"

Mum would be all right. Even if she were taken seriously ill, there would be no problem. She was surrounded by friends. Mrs. Eady kept an eye on her and there were lots more who were ready at a moment's notice to perform any small service that might be required. That was what really upset Avril, the knowledge that her mother didn't need her—that and the warmth she had encountered in her hometown. The world of ever-open back doors and ever-topped-up teapots contrasted painfully with the frosty genteel anonymity of Dulwich.

And yet they'd all seemed impressed by her life, not envious, but respectful, as if she and Kevin were somehow their ambassadors to a more sophisticated world.

She'd met Tony Platt in the supermarket. Tony Platt, who she'd gone out with for nearly a year and even considered marrying. And there he was, looking just the same except balding, and with three kids—three bouncing kids with cheerful, squabbling Lancastrian voices and not an inhibition among them.

Tony had been pleased to see her. Friendly and slow, as he'd always been. "Heard you were living down in the Smoke. Sorry we lost touch. You married Kevin Smith, didn't you?"

And he'd said she was looking grand, and she knew it wasn't true. She knew that strain reflected itself immediately in her face, pull-

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ing it down, etching deep lines in her skin. And makeup no longer seemed to smooth out the lines, but rather to highlight them. Still, if she could get some sleep, maybe she'd start to feel better. Yes, when she got home she'd get some sleep. Kevin had phoned each day and assured her that everything was all right.

The cars around her started to lose their outlines again. Must concentrate. Keep going. Only another 70 miles.

A car overtook her, fast, and then cut in in front of her. Too close. Far too close. She had to brake.

She focused on the car.

It was a silver-gray Volkswagen Golf.

I see, trying to get me now, she thought. Right, I'll show them.

She flattened her foot on the accelerator. They wouldn't get away with trying to frighten her.

Her car moved closer and closer to the large-windowed back of the Golf. It speeded up, but it couldn't get away from her. She was gaining.

Suddenly the Golf, pressed for space, swung out to overtake a truck in front. Avril snatched her steering wheel to the right too.

There was a furious hooting and a scream of brakes as the Range Rover overtaking her had to slam on everything to avoid a collision.

There was no collision. Avril swung back to the left and her car slowed down with a crunch on the hard shoulder. As she rubbed her swimming eyes, she could hear the voice of the Range Rover's driver ringing round her head. "You bloody fool! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

The car was still parked outside when she got back to the house—the silver-gray Volkswagen Golf.

Its license plate was different from the one on the motorway, but she wasn't necessarily fooled by that. Still she felt the hood to see if the engine was warm and listened for the tick of contracting metal. But there was nothing. It seemed the car had not been used recently.

Inside, the house was absolutely quiet. It was nearly half-past six. The boys should be back from school. She swayed with exhaustion as she stood in the hall.

No, must resist the temptation to go to bed. Must find where the boys are. Probably with Kevin. Perhaps he'd left work early to fetch them from school. Even Andersen Small must recognize emergencies.

Must be with Kevin. Nowhere else they could be. Unless they

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were with that Mrs. Bentley. Anyway, better ring her to thank her for taking them to school.

"Oh, Mrs. Hooson-Smith, I must say I'm very relieved you've rung. I was beginning to wonder if I was going to have to look after your sons for the rest of my life."

"I'm so sorry. I thought you wouldn't mind just taking them to and from school. My mother's been ill and—"

"No, I didn't mind that at all, but I must confess having them to stay for the past three days has been a bit of a strain."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

"Your husband had to go away on business."

"Oh, no."

"So on Tuesday afternoon I was faced with the alternatives of putting them up or turning them out onto the streets. I must say, I do regard it as something of an imposition. It's not as if they're even special friends of Nigel."

"I had no idea. I'm so grateful. I do hope they behaved themselves."

"To an extent. Of course, people have different standards. About a lot of things."

"Oh, dear. Did my husband warn you about James's bedwetting?"

"No, he didn't."

It was a quarter-past eight. The boys were finally in bed, though not asleep. Still arguing fiercely. They were upset and confused, and as usual they expressed their confusion by fighting.

Avril fell onto her bed without taking any of her clothes off. Just sleep, sleep.

The phone rang. She answered it blearily.

"It's Philip Wilkinson. Is Kevin there?"

"No, he's away on business. I don't know when he'll be back."

"He's not away on business. I saw him in the office this morning. Then he went off after lunch."

"Then I've no idea where he is. All I know is that he's been away on business for the last three days."

"He hasn't."

"What?"

"He's been in the office for the last few days. On and off. A bit distracted, but he's been there."

"Oh. Well, I'm sorry, we've got our wires crossed somehow. As I say, I have no idea where he is. I'm absolutely shagged out and I'm going to sleep."

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She put the phone down and lay back on the bed. But, in spite of her exhaustion, sleep didn't come. Her mind had started working. . .

Kevin came back about half-past eleven. She heard the front door, then his footsteps up the stairs. But he didn't come straight into the bedroom as usual. She heard him going into the bathroom, where he seemed to be going through some fairly extensive washing and teeth cleaning. Eventually he came into the bedroom. "Oh, I thought you'd be asleep."

"As you see, I'm not."

"No. How's your Mum?"

"Better."

"Good."

He reached for his pajamas. "Oh, I'm tired out."

"Kevin, what do you mean by leaving the boys with Mrs. Bentley?"

"I had to do something. I was called away on business."

"You weren't."

"What do you mean?"

"That smoothie Philip Wilkinson rang to speak to you. In the course of conversation he revealed that you have not been away on business for the past three days."

"Ah." Kevin put his pajamas down. Slowly he started to put his clothes back on. As he did so, he spoke. Flatly, without emotion. "Right. In that case I'd better tell you. You'd have to know soon, anyway. The fact is, I have fallen in love with someone else."

"What, you mean another woman?"

"Yes. I have spent most of the past week with her."

"Most of the past week? The shooting weekend—"

"There was no shooting weekend."

"But how could you? What about me?"

"I don't think there's much left between us now, Avril."

"Who is she?"

"Her name's Davina Entick. She works at Andersen Small."

Avril started laughing. "Oh, God, Kevin, you're predictable. Clawing your grubby way up the social ladder. First you got the voice, then you got the job and the house. Then you looked around and you thought, What haven't I got? The right woman. I need a matching woman to make a set with my shotgun and my wine rack and all my other phony status symbols. So you start sniffing round some little feather-headed debutante.

"Well, let me tell you, Kevin Smith, it won't work. Okay, maybe

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you managed to get into bed with her. A man can usually manage that if he's sufficiently determined, and you've never lacked determination, Kevin Smith. But that's all you'll get out of her. You can't push your way into the upper classes. You've always been as common as dirt, Kevin Smith. And about as wholesome."

He knotted his silk tie. "I didn't expect you to understand. I'm sure you've forgotten what love feels like."

"If I have, it's only because I've been living with you for the past fourteen years."

"I'm going now."

"Oh, back to the little love nest in Mayfair?"

"Fulham, actually."

"Oh, Fulham—what a letdown. Couldn't you find a nice upper-class dolly-bird with the right address? Never mind, maybe you can trade them in at Harrod's. Fix yourself up with a nice shop-soiled Duke's daughter, how about that?"

Kevin still spoke quietly. "I'm leaving, Avril. I won't come back, except to pick up my things."

"Oh, yes, pick up your things." She rose from the bed and went across to the chest of drawers. "Why not take your things with you now? I'm sure Devonia or whatever her fancy name is won't want to soil her pretty little hands with washing sweaty shirts and horrid stained Y-fronts, will she?" As she spoke, she opened the drawers and started throwing clothes at Kevin. "Here, have your things. Have your clean shirts and your socks and your Y-fronts and your vests and your handkerchiefs and your bloody Aran sweaters and—"

Quite suddely she collapsed on the floor, crying.

Kevin, who had stood still while all his clothes were flung at him, looked down at her contemptuously. "And you wonder why I'm leaving you."

She heard the car start. But when she looked out of the window, it was out of sight. All she could see, through the distorting film of her eyes, parked exactly outside the house, was the silver-gray Volkswagen Golf.

"Mummy, why have you drawn the curtains?"

"It's nearly night-time, James."

"But it's not dark. It's summer."

"Look, if I want to draw the curtains in my own house, I will bloody well draw them."

"But you must have a reason."

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Oh, yes, Avril had a reason. But not one she could tell. You can't tell your six-year-old son that you've drawn the front curtains because you can't bear another look at the car parked outside your house. You can't tell anyone that sort of thing. It doesn't make sense.

So, as usual, answer by going on to the attack. "Anyway, it's time you were in bed. Go on, upstairs."

"Am I going to have a bath?"

"No, you can have one tomorrow night."

"You said that last night."

"Look, I haven't got the energy to give you a bath tonight. Now *GO UPSTAIRS!*"

"Can't I wait till Christopher comes home?"

"No. You go to bed." Avril didn't want to think where her ten-year-old son was. Mrs. Bentley, who had very grudgingly picked up James from school, had brought back some message about Christopher's being off with some friends and making his own way home on the bus. Avril knew she should be worried about him, but her mind was so full of other anxieties that that problem would have to join the queue and be dealt with when its time came.

A new thought came into her head—a new thought, calming like a sedative injection. Yes, of course, that was the answer. She'd just have to go out and check. Then it would be easy. Just get James into bed and she could go. He'd be all right for a few minutes.

"Go on, James, upstairs, or I'll get really cross."

Her younger son looked stubborn and petulant, just like his father when he didn't get his own way. With an appalling shock Avril realized that she could never be free of Kevin. She could remove his belongings, fumigate the house of his influence, even move somewhere else, but the boys would always be with her. Two little facsimiles of their father, two little memento moris.

"I need some clean pajamas," objected James. "I haven't got any clean pajamas in my drawer, because you haven't done any washing."

Now she had no control over her anger. "And you know why you need clean pajamas every night, don't you? Because you wet your bloody bed like a six-month-old baby!"

She knew she shouldn't have said it. She knew all the child psychology books said that shouting at them only made the problem worse. And when she saw James's face disintegrate into tears, she knew how much she had hurt him. She was his defender. His father had told him off about it, but she was always the one who intervened,

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made light of it, said it'd soon be all right. And now she had turned against him.

At least it got him out of the room. He did go upstairs. Maybe, when all this was over, she'd have time to rebuild her relationship with her children. Now she was just too tired. It was Thursday. Kevin had left the previous Friday. A week ago. And still she had hardly slept at all. She lay back on the sofa. Strangely, she felt relaxed. Maybe now sleep would come.

But no, of course. Her good thought. Yes, her good peace-bringing thought. Yes, she must do that.

She stood up. The whole room seemed to sway insubstantially around her.

She went into the hall, then out the front door. She averted her eyes from the thing parked in front of the house and set off briskly up the road.

A five-minute walk brought her to her objective. It was where she had remembered it would be, in the middle of the council estate.

It was an old Citroën DS. The tires were flat and the back window smashed. Aerosols had passed comment on its bodywork.

But what she was looking for was affixed to the windshield. It was a notice from the Council, saying that the car was dangerous rubbish and would have to be moved. She noted down the details of the department responsible.

Back outside the house, she forced herself to look at the car. It hadn't moved. It was in exactly the same position. Resin from a tree above it had dropped onto the bodywork and dust had stuck to this, dulling the silver-gray sheen.

But it was still a new car. This year's model. Some residual logic in her mind told her that no Council was going to come and tow this away as dangerous rubbish. For a moment she wanted to cry. But then everything became clear.

She wondered why she hadn't seen it earlier. Yes, of course. The car had arrived on the supposed shooting weekend. The smart new car had arrived just at the time Kevin had gone off with his smart new girl friend. At last she understood why she felt threatened by it.

She was so absorbed that she didn't hear the police car draw up behind her.

It was only when the officer who got out of it spoke to her directly that she came back to life.

"Mrs. Hooson-Smith?"

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"Yes."

"I've brought your son Christopher back. I'm afraid he was caught shoplifting from the supermarket."

Avril sat by the window in Kevin's study, looking down at the silver-gray Volkswagen Golf. Now that she knew whom it belonged to she could face it.

It was Saturday. People walked up and down the street loaded with shopping or planks and paint pots for the weekend's Do-It-Yourself. She had sent the boys out. She didn't know where they had gone. Probably the park. The policeman had said she must keep an eye on them, particularly Christopher until his appearance in the Juvenile Court on Tuesday. But she couldn't yet. Not till all this was over.

It was sunny and very hot. But she didn't open the window. Her dressing gown was hot, but she couldn't be bothered to take it off, still less to get dressed. A sickly smell of urine wafted from James's room, but she was too distracted to go and change his wet sheets. Even to close the study door and shut out the smell.

She had to watch the car.

The phone rang.

It was a dislocating intrusion. Like someone forgetting their lines in the middle of a good play, a reminder of another reality.

She lifted the receiver gingerly. "Hello."

"It's Kevin."

He sounded businesslike. This was the way she had heard him speak into the phone on the rare occasions when she'd gone up to Andersen Small to meet him and had to wait in his office.

"Oh." She hadn't expected ever to hear from him again. He was a part of her life that she no longer thought about. It was strange to be reminded that he was still alive. He had no place in the weightless, transitional world she now inhabited.

"How are things, Avril?"

She didn't answer. She couldn't cope with the philosophical ramifications of the question.

"Listen, I've been thinking. I want to get things cut and dried."

Unaccountably she giggled. "You always did, Kevin."

"What I mean is, I want a divorce. I want to marry Davina."

"And does she want to marry you?"

"I haven't asked her yet, not in so many words. I wanted to get our end sorted out first, to feel free."

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"Free," she echoed colorlessly.

He ignored the interruption. "Then I'll speak to Davina. It'll be all right. We have an understanding."

"I'm sure you have." Suddenly anger animated Avril's lethargy. "It'll be easy enough for her to have an understanding of you. All she has to understand is selfishness and petty-mindedness and social climbing. And I'm sure, from your point of view, she takes no understanding at all. You can't understand something when there's nothing there to understand."

"There's no need to be abusive. Particularly about someone you haven't met. Davina is in fact a highly intelligent girl."

Avril didn't think this assertion worthy of comment.

"Anyway, all I'm saying is that I will be starting proceedings for divorce, and it's going to be easier all round if you don't create any problems over it. I'll see that you and the boys are well looked after financially. By the way, how are the boys?"

"Fine," she replied. Why bother to tell him otherwise?

"Anyway, I'll be round at some point to pick up my things. I hope we'll be able to meet without too much awkwardness. We're both grownup people and I hope we'll be able to deal with this whole business in a civilized adult manner."

Avril put the phone down.

A civilized adult manner. She laughed.

Pick up my things. She laughed further.

If, of course, you have any things to pick up.

She took a bottle out of the wine rack and threw it against the opposite wall. It shattered satisfyingly.

She did the same with another bottle. And another and another, until the whole rack was empty.

It was enjoyable.

She looked round for further destruction.

She opened the closet by the window.

And there it was. Of course. The brand-new shotgun.

Kevin had a book about shotguns on his desk. Good old Kevin. Never go into anything without buying lots of books to show you how to do it. Do your homework, you don't want to look a fool.

The book made it easy to load the gun and showed how to release the safety catch. Avril slipped a cartridge into each barrel from Kevin's unopened box.

Then she opened the window a little and continued watching the silver-gray Volkswagen Golf parked outside . . .

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It was early Sunday morning. Eight o'clock maybe. She had seen it get light a couple of hours earlier. All night she had watched the car outside. It would be terrible not to be there when they arrived.

She didn't know where the boys were. She vaguely recollected their coming back at lunchtime on Saturday. But they had found there was no lunch prepared and had gone out again. She thought they had said something about spending the night in the park, but she couldn't be sure. It had been difficult to take in what they said. Her dizziness and the mobility of everything that surrounded her seemed to have grown. It was as if her head had levitated and floated above her body in some transparent viscous pool.

But she knew she would be all right. Her body would hold up as long as was necessary.

The phone rang. This time its intrusion didn't seem so incongruous. It now took on the ambivalence of everything else she saw and heard. It might be real, it might not. It didn't matter much one way or the other. She answered it. As she did so, she thought to herself, "If it's real, then I'm answering it. If it's not, then I'm not." That was very funny, and she giggled into the receiver.

"Hello, is that Avril?"

"Yes. Almost definitely."

She giggled again.

"It's Mrs. Eady."

"Ah, Mrs. Eady."

"It's about your Mum, Avril. I'm afraid she's had another stroke. Doctor's with her now."

"Ah."

"And I'm afraid this one's more serious. Doctor says he doesn't think she'll last long."

"Ah."

"Look, Avril, can you come up? I mean, she's still alive now, but I don't know how long it'll be. They're going to take her into the hospital and—Avril, are you still there?"

"Oh, yes," said Avril wisely.

"Can you come up?"

"Come up?"

"To Rochdale."

"Oh, no, I'm very busy."

"But it's your Mum. I mean, she can still recognize me and—"

"No, I'm sorry. I can't do anything till they come."

She put the phone down . . .

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It was nearly eleven o'clock when the girl arrived. She came up the road carrying two suitcases.

It was the suitcases that alerted Avril. Kevin had a nerve! To send the girl to pick up his things. A bloody nerve.

The girl walked up the road slowly, giving Avril plenty of time to look at her. No, she wasn't that pretty. Not even as young as she'd expected. Looked about her age. Very brown, though, very tanned.

Avril knew she would stop by the car and, sure enough, she did. The two cases were put down, and the girl fumbled in her handbag for car keys. I see, she'd load up with Kevin's things, then drive off in the car.

Avril could see everything very clearly now. The world around her had stabilized—in fact, she could see it in sharper detail than usual. She sighted along the barrels of the shotgun.

The girl had found her key and was bending to open the car door. Avril felt the trigger with her finger. Just one trigger. Kevin wouldn't approve of waste. Just one cartridge would do it.

She squeezed the trigger.

She was totally unprepared for the recoil, which knocked her off her chair. But when she picked herself up and looked out of the window she saw she had succeeded.

The girl seemed to be kneeling against the side of the car. Her back was a mass of red. The side windows were holed and frosted and there were small holes in the silver-gray bodywork of the Volkswagen Golf.

Kevin arrived in his car a moment later and parked behind the Golf. He was in a furious temper.

Davina had turned down his proposal. Not only that, she had laughed at him when he made it. She had let him know in no uncertain terms that at the moment she had no thoughts of marriage. She had added as a rider that, if she had been looking for a husband, she would have looked far above him.

So he was coming home with his tail between his legs. Avril, he knew, would welcome him. She had no alternative.

As he got out of the car, he couldn't help noticing the bloody mess beside the Golf. He stared at the body with his back to his house.

So it was the back of his head that received the main blast of the second barrel of his new shotgun. Some more holes appeared in the bodywork of the silver-gray Volkswagen Golf . . .

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The Detective Inspector watched the police car drive off. "Well, she seemed to go docilely enough, Sergeant."

"Yes, sir. The only thing she seemed worried about was that the Golf would definitely get towed away. Said it was in her parking space. I assured her it would be, and she seemed quite happy."

"Strange. I mean, not her shooting the husband. Apparently he'd left her and gone off with some other woman, so there's a motive there. But the other woman she shot—completely at random."

"She's not hubby's girl friend?"

"Oh, Sergeant, wouldn't that be nice and neat?" The Detective Inspector smiled. "No, we've identified her from things in her handbag. Passport, airline ticket stubs—very well-documented. Just come back from a fortnight's package holiday in Sardinia."

"No connection with this family at all?"

The Detective Inspector shook his head. "Not yet. I personally don't think we'll ever find one. I think that poor woman's only offense was to use someone else's parking space."

"Q"

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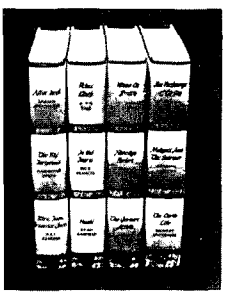

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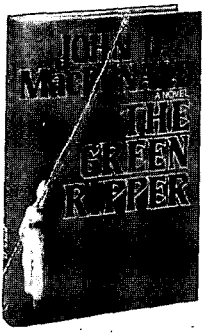

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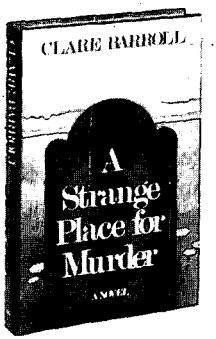

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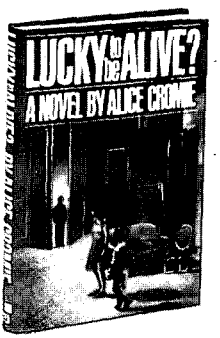

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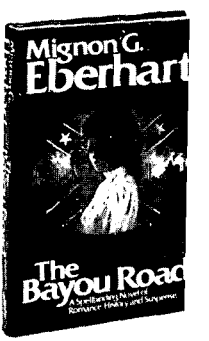

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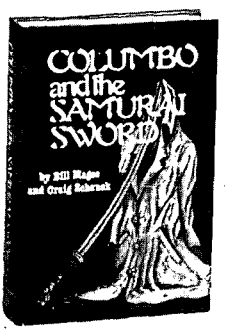

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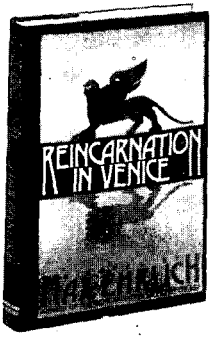

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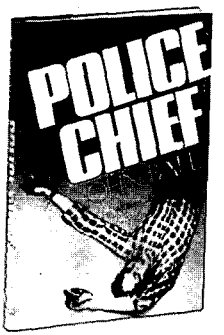

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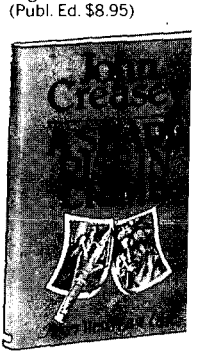

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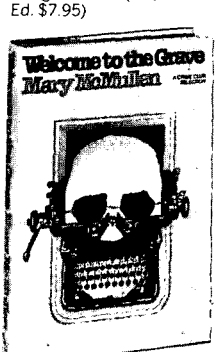

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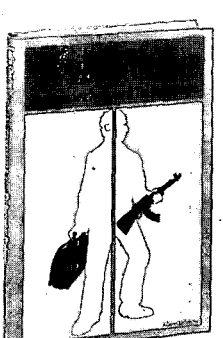

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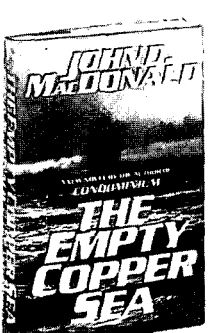

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